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School Consolidation and the Politics of School Closure Across Communities

Zorka Karanxha¹, Vonzell Agosto¹, William R. Black¹, and Claudius B. Effiom¹

Abstract
This case involves dilemmas for educational leaders who may face the process of school consolidation brought on by decreased funding and demands for accountability. We highlight the challenges and opportunities to collaborate within and across diverse communities and schools with varying expressions of cultural, political, ethical, and organizational power and interests. The teaching notes coincide with aspects of the case that involve principal responsibilities, equity concerns, and negotiations amid the demands of multiple constituencies. Theoretical frameworks highlighting asset-based approaches, leadership for social justice, and micropolitics are emphasized.

Keywords
school consolidation, school closure, choice, community engagement, values, ethics (justice), culturally competent leadership

Case Narrative

The News

After the last of 23 school buses arrived that early November morning and dropped off Roosevelt Neighborhood School students without incident, principal Brian Jones glanced up and saw one of the associate superintendents getting out of her car. Something is up, thought Principal Jones. He seldom witnessed district-level administrators arriving to a school campus without prior notice. Principal Jones headed back to the main office, unaware of the chain of events that would quickly thrust him into a

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cauldron of intense activity designed to reshape the educational structure of the local public school system.

Jones knew that word in the rumor mill among lower level administrators was that additional cuts were coming. The summer round of budget cuts—which had reduced the number of assistant principals in middle schools from three to two, changed daily school schedules, and other initiatives to cut spending—were failing to stem the tide of red ink. The district was forced to contend with reduced state spending on education and the decline in local revenues due to plunging property values related to the economic recession. Furthermore, Jones knew that after 50 years of steady growth in school enrollment, the district had experienced a 2.2% decline in enrollment last year and a 7% decline in enrollment since 2000. As a first year principal at Roosevelt Neighborhood School, Jones was well aware that although this neighborhood middle school was available as part of the district’s choice options, it had been underchosen during the period of family choice for school attendance.

The associate superintendent, Ms. Smith, met Principal Jones in his office. She closed the door and informed Jones that the next morning, at the scheduled school board workshop, a proposal to “merge” Roosevelt Neighborhood School with a magnet middle school of choice (Scott Magnet School) located two miles to the east would be one of the major items on the agenda. Principal Jones wondered about the reasons behind this school closure, as usually reasons behind school closings are related to issues of discipline, facilities dilapidation, or repeated failure to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP); however, Jones knew none of these issues applied to Roosevelt Neighborhood School. Later that day, Principal Jones learned that the main reason for this proposed consolidation was related to cost savings but found no budgetary projections for the expected savings. After Ms. Smith left, Principal Jones leaned back in his seat pondering the ramifications of this proposal on the school communities Principal Jones served (the teachers, the students, and parents from different backgrounds), as well as himself. Principal Jones would soon confront questions such as who has the power to shape the multiple decisions that would inevitably be made in the consolidation of the community school with a magnet school of choice, and who can attend and how will acceptance be determined.

Although Ms. Smith directed Jones to keep the information to himself, by 4:00 p.m. the following day, Principal Jones knew he had to do something. He felt that it would be unethical to allow the staff to leave the building without notifying them that a proposed consolidation would be discussed at the Board meeting. Jones called an emergency faculty meeting at 4:20 p.m. and told them of the proposed consolidation. As the staff assembled, Jones sensed that several individuals already knew but most appeared to be stunned by the news and clustered in small groups to talk. Over the next hour, groups of teachers and staff slowly left the media center thanking Principal Jones for trusting them enough to share the difficult information. They realized from his comments that Jones had not been authorized by his superiors to talk to them at this time. After the meeting ended, Principal Jones felt a sense of resignation set in as he reflected on the words that he had read the night before from George Cawood, a consultant with the Kentucky School Boards Association:
School leaders take few actions that can evoke the levels of passion like closing a school. That is one of the toughest things when for many communities the school is considered to be the center and if you remove the school, you remove the heart of the community. The only way [district leaders can] counteract that reaction is to conduct research and use the data to show how it will benefit students from curriculum offerings, nicer facilities or savings in terms of maintenance. But sometimes, you can get all the data out there and it still will not change the attitudes in the community. (Hughes, 2003, p. 16)

Principal Jones knew instinctively that he had made the right decision.

What were the potential risks and rewards facing Principal Jones concerning his decision to reveal the merger plans to the teachers and staff?
Was the decision to reveal the merger reflective of ethical leadership practice?
What are some of the foreseeable challenges the principal should expect to confront over the coming year? How might Principal Jones prepare the Roosevelt staff, the students and parents, other community members, and himself?

Context

Historical. Several Florida school districts, many of which are among the largest and most diverse districts in the country, have been placed under mandatory court orders to desegregate. As part of desegregation efforts some districts developed fairly complicated busing schemes despite resistance in the form of community antibusing campaigns (Borman et al., 2004). Initially, many of these desegregation plans involved the disproportionate closure of formerly all-Black schools and the transfer of Black students to traditionally White schools (Shircliffe, 2002). In some districts, busing was met with frustration and “hopelessness” by Black parents, who felt that their children, who on average were bussed away from their neighborhood schools many more times than White children, carried the heaviest burden during desegregation (Shircliffe, 2002). Latino students were not considered in the original desegregation cases that focused on the segregation occurring between Black and White racial groups, and even when the population increased they continued to remain outside the scope of Florida’s desegregation orders until the 1973 Keyes v. Denver School District decision that recognized Latinos’ right to a desegregated education (Borman et al., 2004). Currently, “States such as Texas and Florida that are seeing the fastest growth in Latino enrollment are also among the states where Latino students experience the greatest segregation” (Orfield & Lee, 2005, p. 16).

This case describes a district in Florida that has historically struggled with desegregation since the 1954 Supreme Court decision Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas, achieving unitary status in 2000 after approximately 30 years of court supervised desegregation efforts that aimed to eradicate a dual status system of separate educational structures for Black and White students. The district witnessed significant growth in its Latino (or Hispanic) population after unitary status and currently 6.7% of the students served identify as Latino (or Hispanic). This case focuses on the merger
of a magnet school (Scott Magnet School) that primarily served White students with a neighborhood school (Roosevelt Neighborhood School) that served students from Black and Latino racial and ethnic groups who made up over two thirds of the student body, that is, until the merger occurred at the end of the school year and Scott Magnet School came to occupy the site of the neighborhood school (Roosevelt Neighborhood School). Issues of infringement, ownership, and the ghosts of prior school history surrounded the school consolidation process.

**District.** Located in Florida, the Sunshine School District is one of the 75 largest school districts in the country. Each of the seven members of Sunshine School Board represents a district with approximately 17,000 students. The court-ordered desegregation plan resulted in the busing of many students across the northern regions of the district, which tended to be more affluent and less economically and racially diverse, and tended to have significant amount of resources to support parent involvement. In contrast, the southern regions were often less affluent, with residents who were predominantly Black and more recently Latino (majority new immigrants), with fewer resources to support traditional parent involvement initiatives such as membership and attendance at PTA meetings. Schools often were not responsive to differences in the communities’ cultural norms and values about what types of involvement were relevant or needed. In the 1990s, the district enacted a policy of situating choice schools (i.e., magnet schools) within the southern district neighborhoods as a desegregation strategy because students from across the districts would attend magnet schools generally designed around a specific curricular emphasis. However, magnet schools continue to face criticism that revolves around the issues of limited access and lack of transportation available to students who choose to attend these schools (Blank, Levine, & Steel, 1996). Overall, magnet schools tend to serve more affluent students, and fewer students with special needs and English Language Learners (ELL; Blank et al., 1996). The choice schools within traditional neighborhood schools in the southern part of the district had sufficiently impacted enrollment patterns for the court to lift the desegregation order. The 1983 report *A Nation at Risk,* and subsequent documents decrying the mediocrity of public schools, spurred the “back to basics” movement (Ladson-Billings, 2006) that emphasized the acquisition of subject matter and student discipline (Brodinsky, 1977). The district embraced the “back to basics” magnet model and set up six “back to basics” elementary, three middle, and one high magnet school and promoted the perception of these schools as family oriented with a structured environment, rigorous curriculum, and joint parent−teacher−student commitment to provide quality education for all students in a safe environment. Important features of the educational philosophy of the district’s “back to basics” magnet schools include a focus on student self-responsibility and discipline, daily homework, and a dress code that is more restrictive than that of the school district. Parents of students in early and middle school grades must provide transportation for their children to school, attend meetings, and review and sign all homework assignments. Parental involvement is contractual at all “back to basics” magnet schools and students can be easily dismissed from the school if the parents do not adhere to the guidelines for homework/
classwork and discipline or requirements of the contract. The schools are very popular in the northern part of the district, and there are long waiting lists to attend these schools.

**Roosevelt neighborhood school.** In 1990, Roosevelt Neighborhood School was located on the divide between the north/south side of the city, a divide that also stood as the demarcation line between racially segregated communities of Black and White residents. Roosevelt Neighborhood School was situated in a neighborhood whose residents were primarily middle class and White. Unlike most schools in the district, it had served an integrated population of students in comparison with schools that were completely segregated and resistant to desegregation orders. The school personnel had recently reconnected with the school’s 50-year-old history of focusing on building relationships with students and maintaining a multicultural atmosphere that supported relationships between the approximately 800 diverse Black, White, and Latino populations that had come to be evenly represented in the student body. One third of the Latinos were primarily from immigrant households. Approximately 70% of the student body was approved to receive the free or reduced lunch rate that was 25% higher than that of the district. The school was home to a large gifted program for students, and an ELL program. The school had not performed at the lowest level of the state’s accountability system’s grading scale, nor at the top. Although 800 students attended the school, the facilities had capacity to handle a greater number of students. Some of the parents of the gifted students had voiced concerns that the discipline was lax.

**Scott magnet school.** Scott Magnet School, even though only 7 years old, had reached its capacity of 600 students, with 83.5% White student enrollment, 8.5% Black, 2% Asian, 4% Latino, and nearly 2% identified as of mixed race origin. Only 8% of the students were eligible for free and reduced rate lunch in stark contrast to the district rate of 45%. As one of several “back to basics” magnet schools in the district, Scott Magnet School drew students from a large geographic area. The school had consistently earned the highest rating in the state’s accountability reporting system. The school did not have either a gifted program or an ELL program. The school was true to the “back to basics” philosophy and promoted a strong sense of responsibility, strict discipline code, rigorous curriculum, and strict parent involvement plan. Parents were required to sign a contract agreeing to abide by and support the policies of the school such as attending monthly parent/teacher meetings and reviewing and signing their child’s nightly homework.

Given what you know, in what ways do the schools and district policies and actions reflect the values of choice, efficiency, equity, and quality? What are some issues the magnet school might face when absorbing the new students? In what ways might students be negatively impacted by the consolidation process? Which students might bear a greater burden? What other issues do you see Principal Jones facing due to consolidation?
Power and Interests in the Consolidation Process

The decision had been made at the district level to involve 11 schools in either closure or consolidation. The first meeting of principals involved in the merger of schools was held in mid November in the associate superintendent’s office to plan for the merger of schools, which would occur the following school year. At the beginning of December, the regional superintendent called to set up a meeting to notify families of Roosevelt Neighborhood School of the proposed changes. Principal Jones wondered if this meeting was to be a meeting with all the parents of the school in general or members of the school’s parents, teachers, and students association (PTSA). Jones convinced her of the former, because he wanted all parents to have access to information and the opportunity engage in the process.

Meanwhile, the schools’ administrative teams were meeting to discuss the consolidation process. The Scott Magnet School’s team was of the strong opinion that the new school should adopt the name of their existing magnet school, because it had high name recognition and the reputation for safety and academic excellence. In addition, the Scott Magnet School’s team and parents immediately raised a question about who would lead the newly consolidated school. The school’s leadership, they felt, was a critical factor in maintaining the continuity of the school’s traditions and philosophy. On multiple occasions, Principal Jones heard the Scott Magnet School’s team members make comments reflecting an assumption that since the new school would be a Back to Basics magnet school all the existing staff at Scott Magnet School would simply move to the new location (Roosevelt Neighborhood School) and that any needed additional staff would then be selected using an open district application process. No mention was made of the Roosevelt Neighborhood School’s staff. Two miles away, the Roosevelt Neighborhood School team discussed how the Scott Magnet School team did not appear to want to discuss how the communities were different. This left the Roosevelt Neighborhood School team to raise the following questions: Who would attend this school? What would be the selection process for students and staff? Would Roosevelt Neighborhood School students be grandfathered into the magnet school? How would they adjust to this stricter behavioral setting? Would the parents be able to provide transportation for their children to attend the new magnet school? What would happen to Roosevelt Neighborhood School teachers who elected not to participate in the Back to Basics magnet school concept? What would happen over time to those students and families who elected to participate and would there be structures in place to monitor and support their transition and adjustment?

Over time, Jones worried that many of the Latino parents living in the surrounding neighborhoods would choose Scott Magnet School without a clear grasp of the requirements and the consequences of not meeting them (i.e., dismissals) would ultimately negatively impact Latino students disproportionately. It became apparent to Principal Jones that the best thing he could do to assist his students and parents was to organize an extensive informational outreach program. Jones brought together a community outreach team comprised of his two assistant principals, guidance counselors, and teachers who were either from the transition team or had experience leading community-based projects. They acquired all documentation available on the Back to Basics
school philosophy and program and prepared multiple ways and strategies for informing parents. In January, a teacher produced a PowerPoint presentation to explain the proposed changes planned for the school and an explanation of what the new magnet program would mean to the Roosevelt Neighborhood School student population. This information was presented to the students during the homeroom class.

Eventually Principal Jones saw the Scott Magnet School’s brochure with a lengthy explanation in English on how to communicate interest in enrollment in the new school. However, in his estimation, important details on the intricacies of the process were excluded. Furthermore, the district wanted to handle all information sessions to ensure uniformity. Unfortunately, Jones witnessed little effort made by the district to reach out to the new immigrant community in the school. Principal Jones quickly met with a Latino outreach group to explain the application process. They pointed out the lack of information in Spanish and the fact that no one else had attempted to specifically communicate with them. In early February, Jones helped to lead the first parent workshop describing the application process and Back to Basics school philosophy. About 200 people showed as well as a translator (sent from the district) who huddled among Spanish-speaking parents in the back of the room. For the first time, teachers from both schools were present and given the opportunity to talk about the consolidation.

Although you do not know much about Principal Jones, how might aspects of a principal’s social identity factor into how collaboration unfolds between the school and its surrounding communities?

As principal, how would you have collaborated with community groups, leaders and organizations?

What are some strategies and tools a principal (who is new to a community) can take to know and communicate with the communities served by the school(s)?

Even with a couple of district-run community workshops, when the 2-week acceptance window ended, less than 20% of Roosevelt Neighborhood School’s families had made the call to enroll into the Scott Magnet School program. Principal Jones called the data management technician to provide a count of the Roosevelt Neighborhood School parents who had completed this final process in securing a seat in their school of choice. Principal Jones recognized that access remained a concern in this process. Jones took out a legal pad and proceeded to draft a letter notifying the Roosevelt Neighborhood School parents who had applied to the Scott Magnet School that the process was not complete, notwithstanding their initial application and their receipt of an invitation to participate in the program; a final step, an acceptance phone call needed to be made to the program office. Each student was individually called to their respective grade-level office to receive their letter to take home to their parent for action. Principal Jones followed up with an automated phone message to each parent notifying them that a letter concerning the magnet program had been given to their child that day in school and required their immediate attention. By Wednesday March 11, of those (20% of 6th- and 7th-grade students or approximately 106 students) who chose to enroll, 80% had made the acceptance phone call. A list of the
remaining magnet applicants who had not yet called to accept the program was given to a grade-level clerk to contact by phone. On the final day of acceptance an updated list showed that two parents had still not called. Principal Jones had the school clerk call these two parents again after which they completed the process.

At the end of January, Jones learned that Scott Magnet School’s principal had been selected as the principal of the new school, leaving him to function as a “lame duck” principal. Although Principal Jones was concerned about the district’s plan for him, he also faced daily significant teacher anxiety and stress. Several teachers had lost their composure in his office as they were worried about losing their jobs. Half of the Roosevelt Neighborhood School teachers decided to participate in the interviewing process to gain employment at the Scott Magnet School. It was early May when three teachers learned they had been offered a job with Scott Magnet School.

At the District School Consolidation meeting in spring, the associate superintendent for facilities and operations served as the district point person to handle the closing process for all the schools involved. No parents or community members were involved nor was there any discussion about community involvement, a topic of concern. More than 80% of the Roosevelt Neighborhood School students opted to attend three other neighborhood middle schools. There had not been much discussion with the receptive schools’ principals about how the additional students would be integrated into their schools’ culture. The applicants who chose to attend Scott Middle School were mostly White students. Around 20% of Latino students enrolled in Scott Magnet School, and less than 5% of the Black students chose to attend Scott Magnet School. A total number of 14 ELL students enrolled at Scott Magnet School. The district assigned the rest of the ELL students and their ELL teacher to a neighborhood school that had not had an ELL program in the past. Moreover, none of the gifted students program enrolled in Scott Magnet School. After the consolidation, most of the students of Roosevelt Neighborhood School attended receiving schools that were larger than the Roosevelt Neighborhood School. In an environment in which there were multiple and competing demands on district resources and district-level personnel felt stretched, there was no discussion of transition for students who would be attending unfamiliar school buildings, getting bussed to the schools, and meeting new administrators and teachers. The newly consolidated Scott Magnet School’s population increased to 850 students. Besides the 106 students from Roosevelt Neighborhood School, 144 additional students from across the district enrolled at Scott Magnet School. After consolidation, 79% of the students were White, 8% Black, 7.5% Latino, 2% Asian, and 4% mixed. In addition, Scott Magnet School gained an ELL population that comprised 1.7% of the school’s student body. The percentage of students on free and reduced lunch doubled from 8% to 17% of the student population.

Discuss instances in the case where the benefits and harms appear unevenly distributed.

Which voices (expressions of power) most impact how the process unfolded (provide evidence from the case)?
Whose interests (i.e., political, cultural, economic) were primarily served through this consolidation?
What could have been done differently (by the principal, district, school teams) to assure equity, quality, efficiency, and choice for the various participants?
How would you assess the cultural needs and assets of the students prior to consolidation?
What cultural knowledge might have informed Principal Jones’ actions?

Teaching Notes

As the population of the United States grew from approximately 124 million in 1930 to 248 million in 1990, the number of school districts has declined from 130,000 in 1930 to 15,500 in 1990. Likewise, between 1940 and 1990, the total number of elementary and secondary schools declined by 69% (from approximately 200,000 to 62,037), despite a 70% increase in U.S. population (Cotton, 1996). Concurrently, localism has decreased as the relative influence and budgets of school boards diminished vis-à-vis the state. By 2000 only 57% of school funding nationally came from local sources and within school boards, members have been representing larger and more diverse constituencies, which suggests less responsiveness to constituent needs (Berry, 2005). Fiscal constraints are likely to occur in future years and result in additional acts of consolidation. Yet the literature provides limited resources to guide school leaders and traditionally disempowered communities in managing the type of consolidation that is portrayed in this case.

The success of consolidation and its effects and processes are disputed in the literature. Malhoit and Black (2003) assert that large consolidated schools have been unable to show significant cost savings and sometimes have proven to be more expensive because of increases in discipline, dropouts, and absenteeism. Furthermore, while the district's expenditures increased substantially, academic performance had a negligible increase. Cox and Cox (2010) examined the results of an urban school consolidation effort in Tennessee and concluded that consolidation was not particularly successful. Taking into account district and student characteristics, academic performance outcomes, and expenditures from preconsolidation (1997-1998) and postconsolidation (2006-2007), their analysis found that Latino and Black student enrollment increased while that of White students declined, as did average daily attendance. Berry’s (2005) longitudinal analysis of a large southeastern district found that increasing a school’s size by 100 students led to a 4% decline in measured student learning. Yet, as Berry points out, keeping smaller schools has political ramifications for board members, as more and smaller schools are less easy to manage and control. Therefore, it is in school board and superintendents’ political interest to limit the expansion of schools (Berry, 2005). Research on small schools has highlighted their benefits such as the creation of democratic community (Malhoit & Black, 2003), intimate knowledge of student needs (Howley & Howley, 2006), and improved learning, rapid progress, increased school satisfaction, and lower dropout rates for disadvantaged students (Strange, 2002).
According to Sunderman and Payne (2009), students who transfer are at risk of losing important relationships and the support they need to be academically successful. They identify important resources that support academic success: the quality of the teaching force and the quality of the curriculum. Multiple authors (Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Sunderman & Payne, 2009; Temple & Reynolds, 1999) have consistently shown that mobility causes educational harm by lowering the test scores of mobile students and nonmobile students alike, and increasing the likelihood of students dropping out.

Political struggles in education have been defined by almost inevitable conflict over values of choice, efficiency, equity, and quality (Stout, Tallerico, & Scribner, 1995). Thus far, consolidation can be justified with arguments across all values, although it is argued primarily under the values of quality and efficiency. Miller-Kahn and Smith (2001) found that in a school district in Colorado, interest groups took advantage of choice policy frameworks to mold a system that met individual interests above the common good. McDermott (1999) studied how consolidation had often reflected a very political process in which localism and powerful local interests were pitted against equity arguments that emanated from state and federal policies that were a result of the civil rights movement and compelled larger governing entities, such as the state and federal authorities, to promote consolidation as a part of integration and the pursuit of more equitable opportunities. School consolidation processes often cause political controversy as they are cast into win–lose frameworks, with state policy-makers and school administrators advocating consolidation and locals opposing it, in general. In addition to opposition, the historical trends toward school consolidation, particularly in rural schools and in some urban areas have been associated with communities experiencing suburban flight or economic depression. Furthermore, McLean (2003) points to the “tension between democratic ideals and the hard realities of system planning” (p. 140) in which all too often decisions become politicized. He argues for school boards adopting specific and transparent criteria for guiding decisionmaking and minimizing the broader deficit orientations that are often revealed in public forums in discourses about “them” and “others.” Yet many school leaders acknowledge difficulty in speaking around issues of race, power, and find it very challenging to advocate for and collaborate with communities that have little political power.

Aspiring and practicing educational leaders might benefit from Briscoe, Arriaza, and Henze’s (2009) text that introduces critical discourse analysis to provide insight into how educational leaders can recognize and revise language that marginalizes communities and students. Yosso (2005) uses a Critical Race Theory (CRT) approach to identifying forms of capital that constitute community wealth that students and families use to transform education and support success: aspirational, linguistic, familial, social, navigational, and resistant. She states, “the main goals of identifying and documenting cultural wealth are to transform education and empower people of color to utilize assets already abundant in their communities” (p. 82). Rather than communicating to families, Miller-Marsh and Turner-Vorbeck’s (2010) edited volume pushes schools to do more to learn about families and to fully contextualize the realities of the multiple communities they serve by collecting cultural and social information outside of school and then to determine whether school staff are engaged in the examination
of their own values vis-à-vis the official curriculum and larger community context. At the district level, Marschall’s (2005) study of minority incorporation into school boards showed that an increased perceived quality of representation of minority communities led to greater trust and satisfaction, which led to system stability and a strong positive effect on upping political participation among communities of color, in particular African Americans. Others suggest that leadership across diverse communities requires action informed by cultural knowledge, skills, and dispositions attained by actors who learn from social and cultural differences and related issues of power to model and generate culturally consonant, congruent, responsive, resonant, or relevant processes, policies, and relationships at a level of competence or proficiency (e.g., Brianson, 2007; Bustamante, Nelson, & Onwuegbuzie, 2009; Cooper, 2009; Smith, 2005; Terrell & Lindsey, 2009). Uline, Tschannen-Moran, and Perez (2003) provide examples of how conflict in school community comes to be constructive, rather than destructive.

School choice has gained traction and prominence in the educational reform discourse with heightened attention being paid to charter schools. The majority of the states (40 plus the District of Columbia) have enacted legislation that allows opening of charter schools. They are publicly funded schools that are free of most of the rules and regulations of the district. Overall, a limited number of students have taken advantage of the choice options (magnets, charters, vouchers, district choice) available to them; however, it will continue to be an important and persistent theme of educational policy (Fuller, Elmore, & Orfield, 1996). To date, research (Frankenberg, Siegel-Hawley, & Wang, 2010; Fuller, et al., 1996) has shown that school choice seems to increase segregation and separation of students by race, class, and cultural background. In addition, students in charter schools do not perform better than those who remain in neighborhood public schools despite charter school movement’s promise of higher student achievement (Center for Research on Education Outcomes (CREDO), 2009). Aspiring future and practicing leaders would benefit from Fuller et al.’s (1996) book titled Who Chooses? Who Loses? Culture, Institutions, and the Unequal Effects of School Choice. Amy Wells’ work on equity is also insightful and helps administrators see how research can inform their dialogue around social justice issues in a postdesegregation choice landscape (for example, Petrovich & Wells, 2005).

Activities

**Activity 1: Community portraiture.** The instructors may divide the class in groups of three to four students to work together to complete an analysis and portraiture of an extended school community (attendance zone). Students will create a community assets portrait using a medium of their choice. Students could do the following: (a) incorporate demographic, social, and economic data of the selected school; (b) frame community analysis and portraiture in a manner that incorporates community assets and challenges; (c) identify and interview at least one representative or advocate from outside the school who can assess and/or monitor the capacity and resources of the school/district to improve its response to community needs.
Students should attempt to answer some of the following questions about the demographic, social, and economic characteristics of the community (use census data and elaborate on the size and characteristics of the population in the attendance zone: age, race, class, education, home ownership, marital status, family structure, mobility rate, and other pertinent data). For the community you are portraying, you should consider the following: (a) Who are the elected representatives for the area; cultural and civic organizations, churches, and what types of social services are in the community? (b) What is the impact of choice, private, and home schooling on the school community? (c) What are some of the ways you would connect and communicate with different community members, taking into consideration their power and interests.

**Resources.** The asset-based community development center provides many publications to assist community development initiatives. It also provides a guide for inventory of community assets: http://www.abcdinstitute.org/. Also, visit the Llano Grande center for examples of student-produced community asset videos: http://www.llanogrande.org/

**Activity 2: Cultural competence assessment.** Olivos (2006) departs from harmonious notions of community relations in his study of bicultural parent involvement, stating that structural economic issues, racism, and a history of deficit thinking have led to parent mistrust and alienation. His study also found that administrators were consistently viewed by bicultural parents as the ones who most impede trusting relationships by consistently excluding parents through what were seen as procedural pretexts. He provides a framework for more emancipatory and democratic experiences that recognize tensions and contradictions. As such, schools will inevitably require leadership that engages with rather than avoids conflict.

2a. Identify and discuss working definitions of culture and cultural competency.
2b. Based on the working definitions, conduct an assessment of the cultural competency of your school. Examine how your school: (1) communicates with its community, (2) identifies and addresses the diverse needs of the students, and (3) ensures a more culturally representative curriculum.
2c. Design a plan that would help students feel welcome and integrated into the school.

**Guiding questions**

What are the values and attitudes of your school on issues related to culture? What understandings of systems of oppression does the school staff have? What is the level of awareness of your staff on the negative effects of white privilege and entitlement?
Resources. The cultural competency project at the Anchin Center, University of South Florida has developed an instrument that measures cultural competency of schools (Elam et al., 2009). See http://anchin.coedu.usf.edu/.

Activity 3: Social justice leadership dialogue. Mainstream educational administrators subscribe to a “difference-blind” stance, which silences racial, class, or cultural difference so as to achieve neutral, objective, and nondiscriminatory practices in schools (Larson & Ovando, 2001). While the difference-blind logic may well be rooted in good intentions, it tends to silence the often difficult and important conversations about contradictions and privileges institutionalized within the school, as the school abdicates its responsibility for social justice in favor of the status quo. Imagine that you are the incoming principal of Scott Magnet School. Given the recent consolidation process and the implementation of the school’s philosophy and guidelines, elaborate on the following issues: parental involvement, uniformity of rules and regulations, discipline, re-segregation, data. For instance, to what extent would you follow the rules, and follow them uniformly, for parental involvement? Why or why not? What kinds of data would you collect and use? How might you think about instructional leadership that promotes racial diversity and effective teaching in diverse classrooms? What are some of the questions you would raise as a new principal?

Recommended Readings

Shields (2004) and Evans (2007) provided insight into why leaders tend to avoid issues of race, class, and power.


Works from the Civil Rights Project/Proyecto Derechos Civiles at UCLA can be helpful. In particular, we highlight two resources. Tefera and colleagues have published a manual to help various educational stakeholders benefit from growing racial diversity and to avoid racial isolation that results from the return to neighborhood schooling and use of magnet and other choice policies. They provide an overview of the legal landscape, examine the roles of teachers and administrators in successfully integrated school settings, and give specific examples of creative experiments that schools are undertaking to promote successful teaching in diverse and integrated classroom settings. In addition, they include a discussion on magnet schools and transportation dynamics that school leaders need to consider and navigate to build more just and integrated schools. Frankenberg and Orfield’s work provides empirical data and arguments that help leaders and teachers keep equity concerns on the table when dealing with magnet programs and schools.

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References


**Author Biographies**

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