Executive Director's Notepad . . .

Creating Great Schools -- It's the Culture, Stupid!

From the desk of William R. Hartman Jr., Ed.D., PAESSP Executive Director

Second in a series of articles on the Job Skills and Personality Traits of Successful Principals

With today's shallow, political focus on how to improve student performance, our astute leaders have created an environment in which all success is measured by test scores (productivity). Their plan seems to be based on the following premises -- public educators are bad, public educators are lazy; show them data, demand they improve the data; threaten their jobs; tell them exactly what to do; watch them like hawks and make sure they do each thing as prescribed; reward data success with money; fire and replace those whose data has reached an insufficient level; provide competition through charter and cyber schools; scare public educators into performing. Blissfully, they seem to believe that by following this simple formula the end result will be a new public/privatized school system that is cheaper, more efficient and in which all students achieve the highest level of success.

Apparently they haven't read any of the myriad of educational research that suggests this is a formula for disaster. This approach is driving public schools back to "The Principles of Scientific Management" approach of Fredrick Taylor promoted in 1911. His approach was often referred to as the "Industrial Model" for creating great schools. It depended upon proscribed procedures implemented by a mindless workforce and strictly adhered to as a result of supervisor coercion. *It was a total failure.*

Additionally, this political obsession with test scores has skewed what we look for when hiring leadership and teachers for our schools, as well as our understanding of what creates the kind of school that continually produces outstanding achievement for all students. We tend to put technological and data retrieval skills highest on our list of must-haves. We look for individuals that have formulas for using these skills to manifest their "programs" on the teachers they will be supervising. We tend to look for tougher, less empathetic individuals who lead through force of will rather than collaboration. All of which will, in the long run, lead to worse schools, not better ones.

Before reminding us of what the literature says is the formula for great schools, let me qualify and clarify my position. I am not negating the importance of using data. I am not negating the importance of technological and data retrieval skills. I am not saying that test scores are not important. I am not against removing unqualified, unproductive teachers. And, I am not against charter or cyber schools. I am saying that we have looked to these things as our redemption and tried to shape our schools using the wrong set of assumptions.

Schools are places populated by people. Great schools are places where people and students enjoy coming to work, and in which they work cooperatively and collaboratively, not competitively. They are places that cultivate a culture of success by respecting each person, employee and student alike for what he/she can bring to the table. They are places in which the leader's greatest contribution is helping to shape a culture of positive, productive peer interaction with a clear purpose. They are places where judgmentalism does not exist, yet judgment is expected and discussed. They are places dominated by pride and good will, not fear and threat. In great schools, people sense a

purpose greater than themselves. Great schools are places where bullying of students, employees or parents is not tolerated.

To create or maintain a school culture that continually produces success, the school leader's EQ (Emotional Quotient) is more or as important as his/her IQ (Intelligence Quotient). It is not his/her ability to demand or punish that leads people to greatness, it is his/her ability to collaborate, discuss and develop plans with peers and individuals. It is not his/her ability to bring ideas and programs and impose them on a staff, but rather the ability to develop processes that create an environment in which ideas and programs are cultivated, developed and improved by all. There are not continually productive great schools without leaders who understand the value of a positive, productive culture and who have the ability to produce, nurture and shape that culture.

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So when you want to find leadership that will help create that continuously productive school, look beyond the technical skills and the specific programs and instead, emphasize the people and process skills the individual can bring to bear. Look beyond the desire to bring someone in who possesses the supervisor skills to make everyone toe the line, and find someone who knows how to bring the best out of all through respect and collaboration. Great test scores can be produced for a year or two by either method -- intimidation or cooperation, but they can only be sustained in schools where a healthy, respectful and purposeful culture has been created.