

# *Preface*

*Why this case study and why now?*

## **WHY WE WROTE THIS BOOK**

We are passionate about school improvement and the ability of our public schools to help all children realize their full potential. Furthermore, our reading of research and personal experience has left us with a profound belief in the transformative power of leadership and the ability of reflective practitioners to collaboratively solve the most perplexing problems of practice.

However, we have been saddened by the recent political rhetoric and literature on school reform, much of which denies what we know to be true about leadership, teachers, and school improvement.

H. L. Mencken is quoted as saying, “For every complex problem, there is a simple solution . . . that is always, neat, plausible and wrong.” We cannot recall a time during our careers when there hasn’t been a school reform movement. While the political contexts may have changed, the people demanding educational change have always sought the same thing: greater learning through better teaching. Clearly, everybody recognizes the relationship between teaching and learning. Unfortunately, the simple solutions that have most frequently been legislated or imposed have rarely done much to link the two. Time and again we have seen school districts seek school improvement through the adoption of a new curriculum, new standards, or new leadership. While these approaches may be neat and plausible and seem to have the potential to make quick and significant improvement, they rarely get to the heart of the matter—the people in the classroom, the folks doing the teaching.

We had the good fortune of working in a school district where another approach was followed. In West Linn, Oregon, for over

thirty years the school improvement process has been predicated on supporting and empowering the professional staff. Over these three decades, this school district has enjoyed a record of strong community support, positive staff relations, and continuous improvement in student performance. We wrote this book to share the story of how this was achieved. We felt it was important to tell this story now because we believe the lessons from this case study are applicable any place where a group of dedicated educators share the common goal of providing an excellent education for their students.

It is the nature of the transformational leader to discount his or her impact. This was certainly the case with Dealous Cox, the superintendent who is the focus of this book. He is a modest man who habitually deflects credit for the district's success. This is another reason why his story is a good vehicle for a book on improving schools by investing in people rather than in gimmicks. Our intention is not to wow the reader with a story of a superman but rather to provide some illustrations of a type of accessible transformational leadership that anyone serious about school improvement can adapt and make their own.

## AUDIENCE

We wanted to share this story with our colleagues and friends working in the field of educational leadership. We believe it will be of interest to anyone wanting to gain a better understanding of the human dynamics of the school improvement process. Since the book is built around a case study of school improvement in a public school district, the examples and illustrations should prove particularly relevant to all current or aspiring school administrators.

## ORGANIZATION OF THE TEXT

The book is divided into two sections and an Epilogue.

### **Section 1: Context: Role of Leadership (Introduction, Chapters 1–3)**

The Introduction reviews the current literature on school improvement and makes the argument for the primacy of investing

our school improvement efforts on enhancing teacher quality. Chapters 1 through 3 discuss the context of this case study and review the pertinent literature on leadership. Taken together, Chapters 1 through 3 present a unified theory of transformational leadership and present the rationale informing the case study district's *people strategy for school improvement*.

## **Section 2: The Process in Action (Chapters 4–10)**

Each of the six chapters of Section 2: The Process in Action deals with a particular leadership responsibility, for example, hiring, professional development, supervision, program improvement with multiple examples from the case study district exploring how leadership responded to these issues. Each chapter in Section 2 begins with a set of “focus questions” for the reader to consider while proceeding through the chapter. Following each chapter, another set of “reflection questions” are posed inviting the reader to apply the concepts and draw personal meaning from the ideas discussed.

## **Epilogue: Who Is Dealous Cox?**

The book concludes with a chapter exploring the man behind the leader discussed throughout the book.

## **TWO CAVEATS**

At the outset, we want to alert the reader to two factors that we recognize might be of concern: (1) district size and (2) the socioeconomic status of the community.

### **District Size**

While the West Linn–Wilsonville School District is relatively small, 8,497 students in fourteen schools, it is important to note that we have observed the same educational philosophy and leadership behavior that are the basis of this book employed by district superintendents in school districts serving well over 100,000 students and by building administrators in large and small schools. We do not believe that there is one “right way” to lead schools. We would be

misleading the reader if we claimed to have “the recipe” for school success. This is not a book where you will be told how to lead your school. Rather, reading this book should be a dynamic process. We encourage you to be an active participant as you read this book. Take each of the stories presented, and recast them in your school’s context. We encourage you to use the examples provided not as recipes to be followed by rote but as illustrations of timeless concepts that should be adjusted/adapted to fit your own situation. Even if you find yourself working in a school that is demographically similar to a case study school, we still urge you to limit the use of the case studies to the identification of key concepts, always keeping in mind a central premise of educational action research—that is, every educational venue is unique in its own way and, therefore, requires context-sensitive interventions.

### **Socioeconomic Status of the Community**

Our other concern was the fact that over the past thirty years the West Linn–Wilsonville community has evolved into one of the more desirable suburbs of Portland, Oregon. We suspect that some readers would have preferred that we built this book around the experience of a large, diverse urban community. We understand that concern. The students who suffer the most from our dysfunctional education system are too often young people living in communities that are quite different from the West Linn–Wilsonville of today. That being said, it is important to note that this case study is largely focused on the period when this approach to school improvement and the relentless pursuit of excellence first took hold in the district. The West Linn School District of that day served a significantly more economically diverse student body. Although we would have preferred to study a community more representative of the nation’s diversity, there were reasons that compelled us to go ahead with reporting this particular study at this time.

We were both fortunate to have been participant observers in this particular case study, having both worked in a variety of capacities in the district. Consequently, we had ready access to people and events, which would be hard to duplicate in a short time in another location. Furthermore, we are concerned that the national discussion on school reform is rapidly moving in dangerous directions, and we felt it important to enter into that discussion while there was still a chance for reasonable people to debate strategy.

In closing, we know the current West Linn–Wilsonville School District may be different in some significant ways from where you currently work. But we ask you to consider each of the principles discussed in this book asking of yourself, How could I make this work for me, in my school/district? We strongly believe that all children deserve to be educated by talented faculties and at productive schools such as the ones that we will be discussing in the chapters that follow. Nothing would make us happier than to see every student in America attending school with a creative, energized, and empowered faculty where a relentless pursuit of excellence has become the norm.