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Leadership Lessons for the 21st Century: Superintendents' Perspectives

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Celebrating 50 years in the educational leadership business, the Institute for Educational Leadership (IEL) asked practitioners from around the country, including dozens of Superintendents, to share their leadership lessons. The responses culminated in ten leadership lessons. We invited two former Superintendents, Dr. Clifford B. Janey and Dr. José M. Torres, to share their reflections of how IEL's leadership lessons connected to their own practice. What they told us is important for all school leaders to know.

IEL Leadership Lesson: Leaders dream of a better world. They ground a shared vision in audacious possibility and practicality.

Janey: When I became Superintendent in the District of Columbia and its State Superintendent, it was clear that a new strategic plan no matter how clear and comprehensive would not be compelling unless there was on the ground engagement conversations and commitment from the community to its ideals. The first order of business was to build a plan "Declaration of Education," followed by "Master Education Plan," which were more than collection of interests from all segments of the community but a measureable way to determine what progress was needed and how we can get there.

The call of action was answered by the formulation of the DC Education Compact. The compact involved diverse sectors: fortune five hundred companies, higher education foundations, voters, citizens, political leaders, and nonprofit organizations. The Compact was instrumental in creating a public education agenda and sector groups focused on realizing strategic accountable goals in areas such as early childhood education teaching quality, school leadership and the social issues that challenge schools and communities. Within three years on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) DC made significant math and reading gains, among the fastest improving in the nation with nine and thirteen point gains in fourth grade reading for black and Hispanic students respectively.

Torres: To make a difference in the lives of students, school leaders need to become the architects for creating dreams, inspiring hope, setting high expectations, and enabling these dreams to become realities through structure and collaboration. To this end, I wanted to create an aspirational accountability plan with ambitious goals, "Destination 2015," whose purposes included: (1) ensuring all students have access to powerful teaching and learning opportunities; (2) improving student and staff performance and eliminate achievement gaps; (3) providing resources that support academic success for all; (4) increasing communication and advocacy through family, community, and employee engagement; and (5) placing an effective employee in

every position. To realize these goals, Destination 2015 focused on values and beliefs; that is, culture. For example, in 2010, we worked with a local hospital to provide all newborns with little Onesies. On the fronts were printed "Class of 2028," which promoted the dream of on-time high school graduation, and on the back was "Class of 2032," which seeded the idea of college matriculation and completion.

IEL Leadership Lesson: Leaders recognize that knowing how to lead change is as important as knowing the change one wants to achieve

Janey: A missing and often ignored democratic principle in the education reform conversation today is how we create policies to advance the status of students with disabilities and improve the learning environment in which they are taught. When I became Superintendent of Schools in Rochester New York the district faced more than decade old Federal Court decision that students with disabilities were not provided adequate, equal and timely services for success in school and life. Over time my team and I learned and relearned the primacy of the classroom in the context of how to implement system wide change. We sought an unprecedented education solution for a well-established legal problem.

Classroom change was by itself was not uncommon but creating 70% of the elementary and 50% of secondary classrooms to include students with disabilities was. Leading change required, whether at the classroom or district level, preconditions. Inclusion became that precondition to advance the teaching and learning of students with disabilities and close achievement gaps with their peers. Closing the achievement gap by 50% on regents and higher level courses was in part why the Federal Judge Michael A. Telesca in his decision to lift the 21 year old court decree stated acknowledged "dramatic" and "substantial" progress by the district but in his conclusion he stated, "while the school district has shown ample evidence of wholesale, system wide reform in the way it provides special education services to special needs students it has also demonstrated that it has reformed its practices at perhaps the most important level the classroom."

IEL Leadership Lesson: Leaders embrace and manage the tensions that are pervasive in their work and help others do the same. They balance the importance of building strong trusting relationships with demands for accountability and quick action, never overlooking one for the other.

Torres: Superintendents face an inherent tension between responding to urgent issues of the day and digging deep to solve the pervasive problems facing a community. As Superintendent I wanted to ensure that when we rectified a persistent problem, its outcome supported all of our students. For example, we transformed the bilingual language model from a subtractive model to an additive one in order to support and meet the needs of all students in Illinois School District U-46. This model was named "Dual Language" and had as its motto: You don't have to lose a language to learn another language. We began with our youngest students in elementary school and added a grade level each year. We developed and executed a project management plan to deliver the program's roll-out, which the Board of Education adopted as a dual-language policy. This model was institutionalized across the District and was expanded into the high school grade

levels. Today, families are so attracted to the Dual Language Program and policy that they're moving into the District.

IEL Leadership Lesson: Leaders are anchored in a commitment to equity and the pursuit of social justice. They mobilize partners and build collective will to ensure opportunities for all children and youth.

Janey: There is power in the cultural rhythms of communication. People talk about the schools in their religious institutions, hair salons, barber, diners, bus stops etc. When the district promotes community engagement and people have real access to open communication and know that their questions carry equal weight as those from business and city hall, Superintendents are able to build a portfolio of credible strategies to deal with complex policy issues entwined in personal narratives. For instance, one parent alerted me that the city school district had lowered its standards for athletic participation of students in sports in such a way as to allow a female student to play in regional and state competition with a 1.7 GPA.

In a country that values athletics for the sake of athletics, educational standards can go awry. In Newark, New Jersey our strategy to overcome this tension between sports and education involved a series of town meetings engaging on average four hundred constituents per town meeting. As a result, new policies and higher standards for promotion and graduation were successfully implemented with the support of community ambassadors. This coalition building experience strengthened "trust" relationships within the community and provided the district a unique opportunity to make the best case ever to remove itself from sixteen years of state control.

Torres: As Illinois School District U-46 Superintendent, I promoted closing the achievement gap and endeavored to raise achievement by establishing access to learning opportunities and cultivating relationships. To support these efforts I created the cabinet-level position of Chief of Equity and Social Justice. We held three professional development days per year with district leaders for the purposes of addressing race and for meeting the challenges of complex management issues. Members of our team attended a conference given by Glenn Singleton, author of *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* (2005), whose materials we used for district and school level conversations. We also invited Katie Haycock, The Education Trust; Joy DeGruy Leary, author of *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (2005); and a Master Trainer from VitalSmarts to focus our work on *Influencer: The Power to Change Anything* (2007). These authors' ideas were successfully adapted to our local context so that the promotion of equity and social justice was achieved.

About Superintendents Interviewed:

Dr. Clifford B. Janey is a Senior Research Scholar at Boston University's School of Education. He served as Superintendent of the Newark Public Schools (Newark, NJ), District of Columbia Public Schools (Washington, DC), and Rochester City School District (Rochester, NY).

Dr. José M. Torres is President of the Illinois Mathematics and Science Academy (IMSA) in Aurora, IL. Prior to coming to IMSA, he served as Superintendent of School District U-46 in Elgin, IL (2008-2014).

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