Racism, Fear, and School Leadership

In a New America

If your child spent months feeling unsafe at school, you might support their decision to find strength by staring down apparent threats, maybe even isolate themselves for safety, and in extreme circumstances understand their instinct to bring a weapon to school. While you don't condone violence, you would question whether the school environment let down this child, influencing their judgment and heightening their instinct for self-preservation.

If the child's parents lobbied to restrict students bussed into the district, blamed for their child's fear, this might also seem reasonable. And if the school board chair called for a referendum on temporary restriction for out of zone students, we would either support their no non-nonsense approach or perhaps question if they were responding to pressure, pandering, or following their instincts.

Similar decisions are being made every day in schools across the country, influenced by how conservative or progressive the region, the degree of diversity, and the quality of leadership. While even superb leaders may not overcome strong forces for sameness in any community, a poor leader with persuasive self-interests can generate influence with greater ease. If the leader is articulate and speaks to the base instincts of the community, they can create a following that imbues them with authority.

Leadership that trades stewardship of dynamic processes for promotion of self-interests, will polarize diverse communities. Those who challenge the myopic view of leadership, can expect more battles, not debates, where obfuscation of true motivation is a primary tactic. During these battles, the true complexities of issues become buried behind illusory rallying cries. Allegiances which psychologists term identifying with the aggressor, along with outreach skills determine success. This may be the norm in the New America.

A retrograde era of leadership has already begun trickling down to the community level, where school boards anticipate greater control. Examples can be found in communities capitalizing on the opportunity to promote more historical views of unity. Superintendents with progressive agendas are at risk by the reorganization of conservative boards, in favor of those who will exchange status for influence. Issues such as the one described above will become fuses for community unrest, serving as self-fulfilling prophecies.

And what if the student described earlier was feeling scared without any actual threat? Let's imagine the student was reacting to years of exposure that Blacks are violent and that Hispanics are taking away all the good jobs, building an inherent bias he then projected onto the students at school. What if this same student was putting out non-verbal signals to his peers that he was hostile toward ethnicities? And let's consider the scenario in which there were incidents of actual threat, but proportionally no different from what the school found for the non-minority student populations.

Schools are the testing ground for how we address and solve the most important social issues of our time. The questions we ask are not simple questions and the nuances of these issues require exceptional leaders to ensure constructive processes for working them through. School boards with pollical appointees, superintendents with career agendas, and parent communities that operate out of self-interest all need to hold each other accountable for healthy negotiations, putting processes ahead of outcomes as our gift to the leaders of tomorrow.

Author

Dr. Jared Scherz is a clinical psychologist, the author of five books on schools and the founder of TeacherCoach. TeacherCoach is the first free PD platform that integrates all four dimensions of PD, providing the opportunity for schools to generate income on the road to financial self-sufficiency.