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The Social Construction of School Failure: Leadership's Limitations

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Abstract

A case study highlights barriers encountered by an urban school principal in implementing reforms within the context of the Kentucky Educational Reform Act. By comparing the competing expectations of Miller's (1995) five capitals and Ianneconne and Lutz's (1970) dissatisfaction theory, the case study dramatizes that Site-Based Decision-Making councils exemplify a policy decision that ignores the practical realities of distressed schools. The lack of congruence between policies and the school reality makes implementation of school reform predictably unsuccessful.

Introduction

Widespread press coverage of the march for civil rights in the 1960's opened the public's eyes to center city poverty and rural regions with third world living conditions. These images made

believers in the American tenets of justice and equality attack the status quo (Sergiovanni, Burlingame, Coombs, & Thurston, 1999). Social activism compelled idealistic reformers to the optimistic assumption that public policy could dictate a more just society (Kantor & Lowe, 1995; Spring, 1998, 1997, 1976). Public schools became the laboratory to experiment in the social reconstruction of society (Corbleth & Waugh, 1995; Levine, Lowe, Peterson, & Tenorio, 1995; Fullan, 1993; Steele, 1992, 1990).

During the intervening years many educational reformers have attempted to translate their social justice assumption into policies that impact practice. Unfortunately, at the same time, the urban community reality frustrated reform progress. The failure of numerous reforms left dismal images of urban life that continued to march across the television screen or create a mental picture with grim statistical data (Sarason, 1997, 1995, 1990). As recently as the 1998-99 school year, well-intentioned policy mandates continued to fall short of a real solution to the social construction of failure that plagues too many students in urban public schools (Clark, 1999; Comer, 1998). These same schools house the majority of America's poor and minority students.

Kentucky Educational Reform Act and Site-Based Decision-Making Councils

On June 8, 1989, the concluding opinion of the Supreme Court of Kentucky ordered the state's school system dismantled. Justices expanded the case from an examination of the state's school-finance distribution to the public school system's limits. At a recent celebration, Former Chief Justice Robert Stephens recalled, "I realized as I was writing that we weren't talking about a few things that needed to be fixed; we were talking about the whole thing." The shock wave that followed the court's ruling inspired the 1990 Kentucky Education Reform Act. The impact of KERA continues to shape policy for public schooling and education in Kentucky into the next decade.

Too often the very policies created to improve urban schools and their educational possibilities prevent school improvement. Site-Based Decision-Making councils are such a policy example (David, 1995-1996). An SBDM council consists of teachers, administrators, parents and community members. The limitations of Site-Based Decision-Making councils and their contribution to the unrelenting failure of some urban schools, ties directly to policy mandates created by state policy makers with little understanding of the urban school reality (Fraser, 1997).

The argument that parent involvement is a necessary component for school improvement has been generally accepted since Coleman's report introduced the concept of social capital. Many others have expanded this concept to confirm their position that parent involvement is the key to school improvement. Those policy makers who included the SBDM council requirement in KERA believed in the engagement of parents and community members in school improvement. Students in high achieving schools seem to affirm their belief and proponents enumerate the parents' contributions to the schools. However, fairness also requires proponents to delineate the characteristics those parents bring with them to the school: moderate to affluent income, advanced education, productive community ties, and an understanding of the political elements of the district's school system.

The opposing argument builds a case proposing that a difference exists between a general plea for parent involvement and the benefits implied in particular parent- school-community relationships. Including positions for parents and community members on a Site-Based Decision-Making council does not insure school improvement. The urban school reality is more complex than that approach considers. Comer and Haynes (1991) suggest that schools alienate low income parents from school involvement by ignoring their pressing basic needs. When parents feel ill-equipped for informal volunteerism it is not likely these same parents are candidates for high-stakes governance positions (Cavaretta, 1998; Gismondi, 1999).

Guskey and Peterson (1995-1996) enumerate the weaknesses inherent in the site-based decision-making model to include:

- the power problem,
- the implementation problem,
- the ambiguous mission problem,
- the time problem,
- the expertise problem,
- the cultural constraints problem,
- the avoidance problem, and
- the motivation problem.

Each of these problems contributes to the external pressures principals experience as they initiate change within their building by developing a capable parent and community constituency. Unfortunately, these caveats received little consideration within the Kentucky model for Site-Based Decision-Making councils.

By the beginning of the 1998-99 school year sufficient evidence had accrued to demonstrate that the KERA reforms were not taking hold at the anticipated pace. Kentucky had already committed ten years to implementation. Although the results were unimpressive, reformers continued to believe that modifications of the plan and more time invested would lead to the intended improvements. By postponing deadlines for the schools' assessment until 2014, a new cycle begins in 2002.

Research Framework

Five community capitals: Miller's argument.

In his text, *An American Imperative*, Miller (1995) builds a theoretical argument for the social construction of minority student failure. According to Miller, the lack of specific parent and community resources, which he defines as human capital, social capital, health capital, financial capital, and polity capital aggravates the urban school reality. Human capital is the knowledge and skills required to function in a technologically complex society like the United States in the twenty-first century. Social capital is "the norms, the social networks, the relationships between adults and children that are of value for the children's growing up"(Coleman, 1990, p. 36). Health capital is the ability to sustain good health through nutrition and preventative care. Financial capital is the income and savings that provide the ability to purchase other resources and advantages. And polity capital refers to the benefits that the community at large provides for all its members. Polity capital acknowledges the interdependent nature of society today. Grounding his theoretical rationale in the non-school urban reality, Miller intends to impact school practice.

Miller argues that due to weak economic expansion and multiple social hardships, the urban school community requires the school to be a conduit of the five capitals for its children and their families. Miller emphasizes the school's role in developing parent-school-community relationships within the urban school community that are "capital-adding" for students. His capital resources, existing as they do outside the student, demonstrate benefits beyond the student's control that further motivate students to achieve. The practical implication of Miller's theory is that individual student effort, while necessary and important, is not a sufficient contribution to dramatically raise en masse student underachievement. Capitals that rest outside the student are also integral for student success.

Clearly, distressed urban schools suffer from their lack of success and spiraling failure. Disappointing student performance results fuel the metaphorical autopsy of the urban school

(Shirley 1997, p.4). The public's perception of the urban school portrays a place to be fixed, restructured, or perhaps even abandoned. This negative perception of the urban school reality has changed little in thirty years with urban schools lagging behind in nearly all quantitative assessments of educational reform progress.

Dissatisfaction theory: The Ianneconne and Lutz argument

Like many state reform policies, the central character in charge of KERA's school reform is the building principal. Principals are often credited with the successful reform of their school (Blase *et al.*, 1995; Goldring & Rallis, 1993; Murphy & Louis, 1994; Peterson & Valli, 1994; Speck, 1999). From this leadership assumption the individual school site has emerged as the crucible of educational reform. This scenario places the building principal in a position of dwindling legal authority, diminishing traditional power, and increasing academic and social responsibility for students. Principals who have successfully improved their school may provide a model, but improvement models do not easily transfer within a locally driven educational system. Reforms that might prove successful in one school or district may confront multiple restrictions within another school, such as an incompatible school culture, a reluctant parent community, or minimal teacher support. Within these inconsistent settings, it seems that each principal builds school reform with little anticipation of success until it transpires within that very building.

In the current school reform environment, crediting successful change to the action of a building principal may be as misleading as the assignment of failure solely to the same principal. Ianneconne and Lutz (1970) pointed to the profound effects external forces exerted upon school change in their dissatisfaction theory. Their dissatisfaction theory states that members of a school community initiate change based on their dissatisfaction with the school's performance. The dissatisfaction theory implies a level of political sophistication on the part of the school community. Informed parents and community members must know what school services are potentially available to them. Too often a parent's tacit beliefs and personal experiences with schooling and learning drive their expectations.

Weakening the dissatisfaction theory for urban schools, those parents whose negative experiences as students color their school activism as adults. Evaluation of curriculum, extra-curriculum, and leadership qualities are typically outside the experiences of most urban school constituents. Parents who are aware of possibilities for school improvement may not know how to manipulate the system to make their expectations for the school a reality. Further, those parents who are more politically proficient routinely withdraw to another school.

Ianneconne and Lutz's proposal that superintendents can only function as change agents within a cast of supportive external players points to the ineffectiveness of school reform that fails to acknowledge the school's external environment (Peshkin, 1978; Smith *et al.* 1971, 1986, 1987, 1988). With site-based management, the urban principal's role is a political role, more similar to that of a superintendent under the traditional local school board.

Summary

Miller argues that the sources of support students require for achievement are fundamentally lacking with the urban school community. He proposes that the urban school will continue to fail to raise student achievement unless an expansive support system prevails within the school community. Successful inner city Catholic schools provide evidence that supports Miller's theory (Bryk, Lee, & Holland, 1993).

Iannaconne and Lutz's dissatisfaction theory rests on the premise that community members are capable of becoming change agents within the school. Dissatisfaction with the school requires

knowledge of a school's potential and the skills to initiate the needed change. As Miller suggests too often parents in disadvantaged communities do not have the five capitals within their adults so that parents are not capable of providing these capitals for their children.

Detailed descriptions of a distressed urban school help to illustrate the difficulties with school reform, within a single district under state mandated reforms, that ignore the arguments of Miller, Iannacone, and Lutz. The following case study provides a window to view assumptions made about school leadership and policy implementation in an urban school (Ashbaugh, 1991; Hamel *et al.*, 1993; Kowalski, 1991; Salter & Tapper, 1985).

Johnny Flynn (pseudonym), principal of a Kentucky public middle school, plays the central character in this case study that portrays the urban school reality. His school, John Adams Middle School (pseudonym), represents distressed urban schools operating under reform guidelines. Through his willingness to share the details of his school's context and his personal dilemmas with school improvement, Flynn hopes to influence the public's perception of the urban school reality. He further believes that by shaping public perceptions, he ultimately helps his students to receive the capitals they require to improve their academic performance. As Flynn's case unfolds, the significant connection between the public's perceptions of the urban school reality and the impact of these perceptions on his school's reform efforts becomes clearer.

The Case of Johnny Flynn and John Adams Middle School

The current reality.

Like many southern cities in the 1970s, the urban site of John Adams Middle School desegregated by a court ordered ruling. Socially painful and financially costly, busing students still balances the African-American and "other" racial categories within the district's schools. Today these two categories simplistically betray the many enrolled minority groups. Principals acknowledge that some past district programs were instituted to slow earlier "white flight" trends. In the current reality, poverty and class issues often displace previous racial barriers, but John Adams Middle School still reflects the public's perception that a low performing school links poverty *and* race.

Johnny Flynn has been principal of John Adams Middle School throughout the decade of state reform implementation. He questions numerous policies designed to reform schooling. Flynn admits that his school has been unable to meet performance goals, in part, due to policies that allow schools and classrooms to re-segregate by race and class (Orfield & Yun, 1999).

Accountability and school choice are features of Kentucky's state reform. These two very public items interact to complicate life for Johnny Flynn. Test scores at John Adams flutter below their goal just as the recruiting environment within the district reaches a competitive frenzy. The district's modified choice plan allows parents to seek out the most appropriate school program for their students. The result is that individual schools use a variety of marketing strategies to attract students. Flynn readily admits that recruitment time amplifies his awareness of the school's problem with public perceptions. Publicized information about John Adams's test results certainly constrains recruitment of high achieving students. Some parents openly discuss their reluctance to enroll their students in John Adams due to low test score results and the school's negative reputation for performance.

Public perceptions and recruitment.

The district's arrangement of specialty programs, magnet schools, and traditional schools, places a neighborhood school, such as John Adams Middle School, at a distinct recruitment

disadvantage. Specialty programs and magnet programs (e.g. Science, Math & Technology) are open to neighborhood minority children, but are routinely filled with white middle and upper class students who have parents with the knowledge to maneuver their way through the district's application process. Typically, any parent who takes advantage of the choice options enrolls a student who meets grade level achievement expectations, and the parent is actively involved with the student's education. Losing these students is a particularly excruciating drain on John Adams Middle School. The enrollment situation wreaks double jeopardy as the top students are lost as contributors to the school's overall assessment scores and as positive role models to the rest of the student body. The parent is also lost as a contributor and a positive role model within the school community (Cavaretta, 1998). These enrollment incidents multiply, making recruitment extremely frustrating for Flynn and his staff. There exists a certain cynicism at an urban school like John Adams that their enrollees are "what's left over." This situation creates low morale that ripples through the school's faculty, staff, and students.

When Principal Flynn responds to questions about his "choice or specialty" program at John Adams, he jokes that he is the "special education magnet." Flynn does not intend his comment to be disrespectful to these students, he simply acknowledges that John Adams has a high proportion of special education students. John Adams enrolls the second highest percentage of special education students in the district (2nd out of 24 middle schools). The school with the highest percentage of special education students is an equally distressed school.

The school categories in Table 1 include an urban school (John Adams), a neighborhood/home school and a traditional school. A neighborhood or "home" school is the school where the district assigns a student by home address. A magnet school attracts students district-wide with a special program. Traditional schools offer a program espousing enhanced home-school partnerships, regular homework, appropriate behavior, and high academic performance. The popularity of the traditional programs caused the district to increase the number of these schools in recent years. Option or specialty programs, traditional, and magnet programs are open to all students within geographical attendance zones.

The data in Table 1 indicate the discrepancies in special education enrollment between the various categories of schools. John Adams represents the distressed urban school as the data in Table 2 will help verify. The percentages of students assigned to the "resource" or "self-contained" category significantly impact the disbursement of resources. Special education students who are in the "resource" category are able to attend regular classes but receive supplemental special education services.

Table 1
Placement Rates for Special Education (Resource)
and Regular (Self-Contained) Classrooms

	Total %	%Black Resource	%Other Resource	Total % Resource	%Black Self-Contained	% Other Self-Contained	% Total Self-Contained
John Adams	17.3%	3.3%	6.3%	9.6%	3.7%	4.0%	7.7%
Neighborhood	11.4%	2.0%	7.2%	9.2%	1.2%	1.0%	2.2%
Traditional	1.5%	0.5%	1.1%	1.5%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%

By comparison, those students who are assigned to self-contained special education classrooms

require more intense services. A self-contained special education classroom has a limited number of students per teacher and requires a teacher licensed in special education. There is no clear explanation why John Adams has a higher percentage of these self-contained classrooms, but one possible reason is the available space. Often district decisions about a program's location reflect the availability of space rather than consideration of other factors. The numbers dramatically illustrate the difference in student population between the selective traditional program, the home-neighborhood school, and the distressed urban school.

Principals readily admit that special education programs are high maintenance, demanding attention to the legal requirements, teacher and aide licenses, and parent communication/meetings. A public perception in the district that the students at John Adams were unusually "bad" aggravates a difficult recruitment situation that includes all personnel: teachers, aides, cafeteria, and custodial staff. Flynn admits his frustration with having too many substitute teachers or aides in the special education classrooms or, even worse, long term substitute teachers who might lack the appropriate training.

Flynn's situation is not unique and unfortunately reflects national trends. On June 24, 1999, the Education Commission of States, a non-profit group that helps policy makers work to improve student learning, announced the group's upcoming focus on the need to attract competently qualified teachers for special education classrooms in "hard-to-staff" schools. The organization received a grant from the DeWitt-Wallace Reader's Digest fund to finance the initiative, *Focusing State Policy on High-Quality Teachers for Hard-to-Staff Schools*. Wyoming Governor Jim Geringer, the 1999-2000 ECE chairman, states, "Common sense tells us, and research confirms that the number one factor in determining how well students do in school is the teacher" (McElhinney 1999, p.1).

Time that Flynn invests wrestling with special education issues is time taken away from other dimensions of school reform. His colleagues at the traditional or even the neighborhood schools designate that time to building the curriculum, supervising teachers, working with community leaders, or developing parent leadership. Flynn's daily reality is not the same.

Principals of a distressed school, like John Adams Middle School, deal with a student population that arrives at school with life experiences from a reality far distant from preschool and elementary school experiences that assist in academic preparation. Flynn describes his students and his school with care.

I think the most challenging thing would be the things that our kids---what they come with, baggage that they bring with them primarily. They come from single parent homes, coming from homes where the parents are not involved that much with the schools, coming from homes, there's not a whole lot of money in homes, and also I would say their academic achievement is low at the time in which they come to you and you have to turn all those around.

Table 2
Percent of Students on Free & Reduced Lunch

	1996-97	1997-98	1998-99
John Adams	80.35 %	79.28 %	80.36 %
Neighborhood	56.67 %	57.91 %	57.96 %
Traditional	15.42 %	15.62 %	21.30 %

Data on Free and Reduced Lunches serves as a standard indicator of poverty within a given school population. The data could be even more accurate if "Free" and "Reduced" were disaggregated. This would enable a clearer distinction between the John Adams public housing population and that of the predominately working class neighborhood school.

Public perceptions and accountability.

Forty-five years after the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, the 1999 Civil Rights Project report for Harvard University, "Resegregation in American Schools," points to accountability measures, such as high stakes testing, that "punish students in inferior segregated schools, or even sending more children to such schools while simultaneously raising sanctions for those who do not achieve at a sufficiently high level" (Orfield and Yun, 1999). John Adams Middle School reflects this trend with its loss of performing students to other schools while the student body assigned to John Adams sinks into deeper poverty and social disarray.

Measurable disparities in income do not completely capture the disadvantages of the urban school. Miller's description of the non-school-based disadvantages of urban minority students that resonate with the John Adams' student population. These disadvantages profoundly affect student potential before students enter school. These disadvantages are almost impossible for the school to remedy alone. To further illustrate Flynn's point about the students that John Adams enrolls, Flynn shares the results of the sixth grade reading placement test. "We only had 14 out of 300 some odd 6th graders that were reading on level. Urban principals recognize that reading is the fundamental skill that must be improved. Reaching grade level performance appears to be an overwhelming task considering the number of students that require assistance. These students' success on the state's assessment test looms near impossibility.

Table 3
KRIS Assessment Scores

	Baseline	Goal	Index
John Adams	27.2	34.5	27.6
Neighborhood	30.2	37.2	33.8
Traditional	53.6	58.2	56.3

KIRIS has been Kentucky's version of a high stakes assessment test. The test results over the years of KERA reform have been disappointing. During this anniversary, the assessment tools and processes underwent examination for revisions, including the subsequent evaluative rankings. The data in Table 3 reflect a system used prior to the revisions. A school's testing performance is public news, but often remains a source of confusion to the public. Parents question how a school ranks "in decline" while their academic teams hold high honors in state competitions. Principals are weary of explaining that ranks were determined solely by the KIRIS assessment. The school's scores must be moving toward the goal score to be considered improved.

Intertwined with the testing debate are special education issues. Marking the current anniversary, some Kentucky legislators promote the increase in fourth grade reading scores as a sign of KERA's impact. Critics counter that in 1998 fewer special-education students were tested than in 1994, making the gains an illusion if the testing population has changed. Mark Musick, the chairman of the National Assessment governing board, believes Kentucky students performed

better this year even with the testing population adjustments. Others have remained critical stating that there will never be any way to know the real results. Musick reminds state officials that no test is incontrovertible, in spite of careful monitoring. During the decade of KERA, Congress changed federal law to mandate the testing of students with disabilities as a condition for federal aid for special education. Under these conditions district pressure for improved testing performance increases for Flynn and his teachers. Again, the high numbers of special education students at John Adams weigh heavily on Flynn's efforts for school improvement.

In spite of state and district efforts to funnel supplemental programs and extra funds into distressed schools, assessment tests still fail to demonstrate adequate progress. John Dornan, executive director of the Public School Forum of North Carolina, a Raleigh-based group for school reform, states that, "It's possible very accurately to predict the schools most likely not to succeed in high-stakes tests." Dornan explains further that in significant school reform the school provides a value-added environment. In other words, the school does bring an effect to achievement. The challenge for urban schools is that considerable value must be added, or considerable disadvantage alleviated, for students to experience a substantive benefit from their educational experiences.

One area that highlights the disconnection between reform expectations at John Adams Middle School and life in the urban community is the suspension rate. The suspension- rate and distribution display the contradiction between the context of schooling and the reality of the urban student's life. Principal Flynn believes that one of the chief barriers to successful student achievement that he regularly encounters is the lack of student self-discipline:

The kids seem to not show a lot of self-discipline so I think that is one of the major issues that we deal with.

Flynn implies that self-discipline impacts student performance in a variety of ways including their ability to learn to read. Self-discipline is an example of a skill that students must have to be successful in school behavior and academic performance. Unfortunately, the urban community environment does not assist students to appropriate structure and discipline into their lives. This lack of self-discipline then handicaps the student at school.

The suspension rate of John Adams in 1996-97 was nearly the equivalent to the suspension of every student in the school (student enrollment = 921). The 1997-98 figures show a drop of about 30 % at John Adams and the neighborhood school (Table 4).

Table 4
Suspensions

	White Male	White Female	Black Male	Black Female	Total
John Adams	187	70	202	118	577
Neighborhood	97	18	73	9	197
Traditional	8	3	7	1	19

Suspensions add to the inconsistent academic preparation some students receive. And in turn, these students are unable to reach an appropriate score on the state's assessment. Behavior that requires a suspension adds to a chaotic classroom environment that does not support learning for classmates either. Too often young African- American male students consider a suspension a sign

of defiance to a white establishment. Too often school personnel fear a suspension serves as preparation for more extreme forms of antisocial behavior including crime. The alternative, the in-house suspension, also accounts for time lost from the classroom, but an in-house suspension is the school's attempt to keep students within the building where there might be some positive influence.

Site-Based Decision-Making as Tool to Assist Reform Efforts

Within the urban school reality, how does the Site-Based Decision-Making model assist the principal to improve the school's accountability results? The descriptions of John Adams Middle School and the principal's daily life attempt to connect the urban school reality with theoretical rationales for the policy on Site-Based Decision-Making (SBDM). Flynn speaks about his difficulty in facilitating a SBDM council to meet its intended purpose within his school community.

Also, we don't get the community leaders involved with the schools, I'd say in school which they have in the suburbs, and then the attitude of some of the parents. Maybe they weren't that successful in school. School left a bad taste in their mouth so they tend to think the same way and that attitude is displayed in their kids when they come to the urban school.

Flynn's word ring similar to Burns' position that some parent's previous negative experiences in school impacts their interactions with the school and contaminates their child's viewpoint of school and learning. Just as the John Adams' students suffer from their school's negative public image, the parents also bear the burden of the public's negative perception of adults who wallow in poverty, single parents who receive welfare checks, reside in public housing projects, and are unemployable. Many of John Adams' parents feel intimidated by school personnel with their "school speak" and some parents are openly hostile, shaped by their own negative experiences with teachers and schooling.

Flynn must organize the SBDM council, fill the positions, train the members, and then administer the policies created by his local Site-Based Decision-Making council. Urban principals struggle to develop more sophisticated interactions within the school's Site-Based Decision-Making council members but they are often thwarted by the sheer lack of resources. Johnny Flynn's daily tasks at John Adams Middle School demonstrate the gap between good intentions as policy and the reality of the urban school. Site-based decision-making councils are the practical venue for parents to become involved with the policy decisions for John Adams Middle School.

Closing Reflections

Supporters and critics of Site-Based Decision-Making muster convincing arguments. On one side, the concept of Site-Based Decision-Making councils remains a worthy element of school reform. Community leader and parent participation in policy decisions for their local school seems reasonable.

On the other side are urban schools like John Adams, with principals like Johnny Flynn, who add his Site-Based Decision-Making council to a long list of activities that take his time and energy and are not easily implemented within the urban school community.

Site-Based Decision-Making councils are predicated on the assumption that the parent and community membership will provide the means to acquire non-school resources that advance student performance. The urban school, due to its inherent characteristics including poverty,

minority membership, and lack of political acumen diminishes the power of the SBDM council to assist the urban school improve achievement. This flaw in the Site-Based Decision-Making model remains over-looked due to the apparent success of the model within other socioeconomic strata. The naive assumption remains that by manipulating (because they are not necessarily increased) resources at the school level, the urban school will catapult to a competitive level.

An understanding of the urban school reality makes it clear that non-school capitals also require enhancement. In order for the SBDM's contribution to reach the maximum, the public's perception of the urban school must be expanded to include its capital deficient community. These augmented capitals will develop the requisite conditions to dramatically improve student academic performance.

The Site-Based Decision-Making model generates its power and strength from the various capital-resources parents, community members, and school personnel bring to the school(Cavaretta, 1998; Gismondi, 1999; Comer & Haynes, 1991). The flaw in the Site-Based Decision-Making model for the urban school is the very lack of these capital-resources within the community's membership.

Related considerations.

Several side issues emerge from an observation of the effects of the Site-Based Decision-Making model on a distressed urban middle school. First, there is the issue of school leadership. A local Site-Based Decision-Making council lacks the broad view of the district. Local SBDM council members seldom consider the advantages of changing the school's principal since they are so closely bound to the current leadership themselves. This is particularly true in distressed urban schools where parent, and perhaps novice teacher participants, often lack experience in assessing leadership quality. Members are often suspicious of a new individual from outside their community.

In turn, under the current SBDM model, a principal is unlikely to attempt to force a change in leadership by applying to another school. A principal bears the same image difficulties that students carry. Consequently, a principal is reluctant to risk credibility with their current school by applying for another position. Should a principal make application to another school, and if the principal was unsuccessful during the hiring process and had to return to the current school, the faculty, staff and parents might interpret those actions as disloyal, contaminating future interactions. Under the SBDM model, seeking a new principal position is a very difficult situation for any principal to politically finesse. Typically, the urban principal is left to await some other cue, perhaps from the central district office, for any possibility of changing schools. Ultimately, the instigator of principal change is the superintendent. Oftentimes a building level leadership change is a necessary requirement for school change.

Second, within the SBDM council, energy and interest focuses on the members' local school. This myopic approach handicaps distressed schools that require input in resources and expertise from other schools or the broader district community. Challenging a local SBDM to feel social responsibility for other children in the district, not enrolled in their local school, is a difficult endeavor. But, if students in distressed communities must rely on local resources, their plight seems an inevitable social construction of school failure.

Third, other policies such as the modified in-district choice plan further disadvantage distressed urban schools by allowing positive contributors to the school to move on to healthier settings. The distressed school loses not only a positive role model in the student, but typically a parent who is a capable partner with the school. This "capital drain" creates problems similar to "white flight" in its effect on the urban school. Parents who are aggressive about their children's welfare should not be penalized for wanting to improve their situation, but the message is clear that a schools must be made effective or closed.

Policy implications

Returning to the arguments of Miller, Iannacone, and Lutz, an analysis of John Adams Middle School reveals that the defect in the dissatisfaction theory for the urban school rests with the community's deficiency in Miller's five capitals. The assumption that the constituents of a distressed urban school will conclude that their SBDM council's membership is ineffective, or their principal is incompetent, or the district inadequately represents their interests, is improbable. It is unlikely that this dissatisfying situation will motivate community members to become politically active or initiate a change in leadership.

Site-Based Decision-Making councils as the centerpiece of community participation in urban school improvement legislation like KERA require modification. Two issues impact the effectiveness of the Site-Based Decision-Making model on reform efforts at urban schools.

First, the dissatisfaction theory implies a level of political sophistication on the part of the school community. Parents and community members must recognize the lack of quality in their school's performance. Then, parents and community members must know how to manipulate the school system to provide services to increase the quality. Too often the urban school community lacks business and industry leaders capable of exerting power and political influence that produces positive results for their local school. Those parents who are aware of possibilities for school improvement, but do not know how to manipulate the system to make their expectations a reality, routinely withdraw.

A second impediment to school reform at an urban school comes from the larger district community's lack of polity capital. Outsiders are reluctant to initiate the substantive reforms necessary to dramatically improve urban schools. The perception that improvement at urban schools like John Adams will require a sacrifice from their school community is not attractive to those outside the urban school community. Most outsiders lament the state of affairs at urban schools, but this lamentation accompanies stated relief that their children do not attend such a distressed school. Too many district constituents do not consider distressed urban schools their school community's responsibility. This lack of commitment to the common good seriously handicaps urban school improvement. The more politically savvy constituents of Flynn's colleague principals have left John Adams Middle School alone to maneuver out of its situation.

At the core, the lack of political acumen by the insiders at John Adams Middle School, and the fundamental lack of polity capital contributed by the outsiders in the district community, perpetuates the current situation. The lack of polity capital, an acknowledgment of the interdependent nature of the community, diminishes the urban principal's ability to accelerate urban school improvement. Autonomous Site-Based Decision-Making councils aggravate the development of the requisite polity capital by sustaining an "us/them" mentality.

School autonomy, which was propagated as a virtue by KERA's school reform movement, has become a destructive vice. School reform has become so idiosyncratic that an individual principal must compete for students, generate supplemental funding, develop community relationships, preferably with generous businesses, and provide leadership for the school in the political arena of district politics. Principals from even modestly affluent school communities have multiple means to attack this situation. The reservoir of parent resources (i.e. volunteer time, fund raising, political connections) make their Site-Based Decision-Making council appear successful. The public perception of a school like John Adams includes an implicit assumption that its deficient performance rests within the people living in the school community rather than within the negative capitals present in the school community. The incriminating evidence might extend to beliefs in racial inferiority, "their" lack of effort and willingness to improve, or simply the obvious characteristics of the community (i.e. minorities, single parents, low SES). The SBDM model requires the distressed urban school community to generate resources it does not have, and holds

no one outside the school community responsible for the social construction of failure for urban students.

Kentucky's Site-Based Decision-Making council attempts to assemble parents and community members together for the improvement of public schooling. The concept of school-parent-community involvement intends to generate the positive attributes of Miller's capitals and bring them to the schoolhouse. Unfortunately, the flaw in applying the Site-Based Decision-Making council model to the distressed urban school is less with the concept than with a deceptive perception of the urban school reality.

KERA's tenth anniversary and the on-going national attention to its reform initiatives provide an opportunity to modify or supplement the SBDM model for the distressed school context. The benefits of parent and community involvement should not be abandoned, but capital development requires a broader community responsibility for distressed schools. A comprehensive community focus that develops the capitals within the entire district, or perhaps even statewide, increases student improvement in all schools.

School reform legislation that fails to take into consideration the distressed urban school reality creates a paradoxical environment for school change.

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