

TALK GIVEN BY LARRY CUBAN TO WERA PARTICIPANTS,
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The Politics of Doing School Reform Daily

I begin with an actual series of radio messages sent to and from a U.S. navy ship.

U.S. Navy Ship: Please divert your course 15 degrees to the North to avoid a collision.

Reply: Recommend you divert YOUR course 15 degrees to avoid a collision.

Ship: This is the captain of a U.S. Navy ship. I say again, divert YOUR course.

Reply: No, I say again you divert YOUR course.

Ship: THIS IS THE AIRCRAFT CARRIER ENTERPRISE. WE ARE A LARGE WARSHIP OF THE U.S. NAVY. DIVERT YOUR COURSE NOW.

Reply: This is a lighthouse. Your call.

I use this actual exchange of radio messages between an aircraft carrier having to shift course when headed for a rocky shore as a metaphor for how even the best equipped, best-led educational organizations can make huge policy mistakes in navigating troubled waters by ignoring crucial evidence. I also want to use these messages to make a second point: That immovable lighthouse

signaling nearby ships of what's ahead is very much like the constant politics involved in reforming schools and classrooms.

These two points: about smart school leaders occasionally making dumb policy by ignoring data and the rock-like persistence of politics in reforming schools and classroom practice is the heart of the message I bring to you this morning. First, let me deal with the sheer stubbornness of school politics.

Unfortunately, most educators view politics with a distaste reserved for a plateful of broccoli. Most principals, superintendents, program directors and teacher leaders see their roles as both managerial and instructional and are disgusted by policy decisions that smell of politicking. Where did this holding one's nose over anything political come from? To answer this question I offer a brief history lesson.

At the end of the 19th century big-city Republican and Democratic political machines handed out teacher, principal, and janitorial jobs to supporters. Textbook publishers bribed school board members to buy their products. Corruption in school management was the norm.

At the beginning of the 20th century, progressive reformers divorced party politics from the conduct of schooling. Governance reforms led school boards to dump party hacks from their ranks and recruit business leaders and civic-minded professionals to serve. Civil service regulations ended the buying and selling of school jobs. School administrators now had to go to college and get a state-issued license to be a superintendent. Most important, school administrators learned to avoid partisan politics.

The norm of political neutrality held that superintendents and principals hide their party preferences and serve elected boards that set the policy direction. Campaign politics where party candidates and voters debated which policy goals should prevail, was considered beyond the pale of professionalism.

The power of that norm remains strong today. It should come as no surprise that seldom do individual superintendents and principals take public stands on the worth of educational reforms or other policies. For example, prior to last November's vote on the charter school law few Washington superintendents and principals, if any, wrote letters to the editor on district stationery or gave interviews to journalists urging voters to either endorse or oppose

the referendum. Nor have individual administrators publicly taken a stand for or against using WASL test scores to determine whether seniors graduate high school. Individual superintendents and principals are expected to exercise their technical and organizational skills in implementing policies that school boards, governors, state legislatures, and Congress--authorize. They are NOT expected to campaign to get particular policies adopted.

Now, here is the rub. None of what I just said means that superintendents and principals do not engage in politics. They do--inside and outside the organization. None of the politicking they do, however, crosses the line to become partisan politics.

Here I need to shift from the common definition of politics to advance Democratic or Republican policies to a more generic definition that each of us understands but often overlooks. Let me offer a few quotes from those who do see political action in the way that I mean it:

*"Politics is the art of the possible." Bismarck unified Germany in late -19th century.

*"Politics is the art of putting people under obligation to you."
Jake Arvey, Chicago political boss in the 1940s

Superintendents, principals, and program directors act politically in the senses these quotes convey because they and elected school boards that hire them must respond to the many goals that schools pursue and constant conflicting public demands to give more priority to one goal over others.

For example, parents and taxpayers expect public schools to make all children literate, build citizens, prepare workers, cultivate individual character, and reduce social injustice even when schools are constrained by limited human and financial resources. Yet pressures from business leaders, teacher and administrator unions, the PTA, the Mayor and City Council, the taxpayer association, local ministers, ethnic and racial leaders, sports boosters, the governor and legislature of the state, even the President of the United States are unrelenting on schools to achieve other goals as well.

Elected school boards want to be responsive to voters--after all, it is a democracy--yet they have limited resources to work on all of the goals simultaneously or satisfy requests from all of these groups. So they choose among these prized, value-laden goals. That's what produces disagreements among stakeholders and within

those conflicts over competing goals superintendents, principals, and program directors engage in practical politics.

This is what I mean by administrators performing a political role. Superintendents count heads on their school board as to which members will support the motion to turn a 1600-student high school into 4 small high schools. Like superintendents, principals mobilize teachers and parents to support their favored whole school reform like Success for All or the district's new reading initiative. They figure out ways to build political coalitions for their schools at budget time or to put a positive spin on bad news during crises.

This form of organizational politics means that smart administrators who understand the role they must play come to see the school district and city as political systems and with that knowledge figure out how to mobilize key stakeholders to gain financial and programmatic support for district priorities. We see that political role played out in John Stanford's brief tenure in Seattle when he mobilized the business and civic elites to support his reform agenda. We see that political role played out when a principal secures grants from foundations and business leaders and gains broad parental and teacher support to give a laptop to each

student. Such a political role speaks to the necessity for superintendents and principals to be leaders.

Many superintendents and principals have learned on-the-job the ABCs of school politics by embracing reforms that act as a safety valve to relieve those conflicting pressures from different groups. And reform they do. Virtually, every school district--affluent and poor, big and small, urban and suburban, white, brown, or black--has launched reform after reform in curriculum, pedagogy, governance, and organization. Some state and district administrators, for example, latch onto new information technologies as ways of improving low academic performance; others see providing small high schools to satisfy the demand for parental choice. And others, of course, embrace higher performance standards and more tests. Some districts do all of these at the same time. It comes as no surprise, then, to say that superintendent and principal reputations are also built on adopting reforms and taking action. Many call this leadership. I call it a politically practical response to the multiple goals and pressures they face.

So this is my first point: The constancy of school politics, the stubborn persistence of that lighthouse signaling on-coming vessels of potential danger, is present each workday among administrators.

And this is where my second point about the linkage between enduring politics and bad policy showing up in classrooms--- converge. If the practice of school politics constantly leads to school boards adopting reform after reform or responding to state and federal laws that mandate reforms, many of these policies are seldom inspected for their logic, supporting evidence, or thoughtful ways of how best to put them into practice. Thus, superintendents, principals, and program directors often implement unexamined decisions. That is simply bad policy. And here I want to take up three recent reforms that have been implemented here in Washington: Putting computers in classrooms, converting large high schools into small ones, and implementing NCLB .

COMPUTERS IN CLASSROOMS

One way of making my point about unexamined policy and evidence to support it is to analyze the thinking behind the state of Washington and most of its districts investing tons of money in wiring schools, buying hardware and software, hiring technical

support, and investing in professional development—all to change classroom practice. For the next few minutes, let's go over a graphic that gets at the logic of moving computers into classrooms.

(SHOW TRANSPARENCY)

In looking at this graphic, some of you maybe thinking: Oh boy, here's another academic with boxes and arrows that have little to do with the realities I face or, Larry, give me a break—I don't have the time to figure out the assumptions that people make about what causes what to happen or the best strategies to use in implementing reforms.

If these thoughts are going through your mind, well, so be it. I do say that hidden policy assumptions within reforms, particularly popular ones, seldom see the light of day. Moreover, I argue that those in district leadership positions are the very people who should reveal those assumptions since so much time, money, and people are invested in putting a popular reform into practice.

(AFTER GOING OVER TRANSPARENCY)

Now, here's my point. School boards and superintendents quickly enlisted in this reform. Eager to satisfy business leaders, civic officials, vendors, and parents, they wired schools and bought

computers. They assumed that technology availability would lead to frequent classroom use and thereby produce the desired outcomes.

But the politics of implementing this popular reform meant that someone had to decide on how best to get these powerful machines into the hands of teachers and students. Who decided whether most computers were to go into classrooms? Labs? Media centers? Or some combination of locations. Who decided what kinds of in-service help teachers needed to use computers for instruction? Who decided how much technical support and what kinds would be offered to teachers?

In most cases, either top administrators made these key tactical decisions or system-wide committees dominated by district and school-site administrators with a sprinkling of teachers did so. As such, these implementation decisions in distributing computers to schools—critical to how teachers and students would use the machines—were political ones seldom made by the very people who were expected to use them.

I raise this point about deployment of computers, technical support, and in-service help for teachers because even with abundant machines and software, *routine* teacher and student use

of technologies for instruction has yet to occur in most classrooms in the nation including the state of Washington.

And among the reasons for low levels of classroom use, I believe, is that few district leaders' analyzed basic policy assumptions, strategies of deployment, and a lack of evidence to support the decisions that were made. Thus, administrators shoved technologies into schools, and hardly considered teacher views about how best to deploy, support, and use new technologies in classrooms. All of these tactical decisions to implement a classroom innovation, in my mind, accumulate into bad policy.

Let me now turn to another popular reform: small high schools. Here again, I use a graphic to outline the policy logic of the popular reform and evidence to support it.

(USE TRANSPARENCY AND *Go over assumptions and strategies*)

Again, I want to make a simple point about the linkage between policy assumptions, strategies, and classroom practice since this is where I would expect district leaders to think hard before rushing to implement a politically popular reform.

POINTS TO MAKE:

1. Much research supports the assumption that small schools can be better for most students in being personal and motivating but little evidence says that smallness in of itself produces gains in achievement.
2. Not much evidence shows that teacher learning communities improve classroom practice and that, those improved practices, in turn, lead to gains in academic achievement or sustained learning.
3. There is a lot of evidence that small high schools often depend upon young—mostly inexperienced teachers—to get started and many of these teachers leave within a few years
4. Finally, the assumption that college prep is best for all students runs counter to so much evidence that a sizable fraction of youth gain little from a steady diet of academic courses because of their current motivation, learning styles, and future goals. Let me explain this important point:

First, lots of high school students would rather find good entry-level jobs or careers that play to their strengths and interests in mechanical work, artistic aspirations, serving

people, and earning money without spending 4 more years in classrooms to get a college degree.

Second, the extremely high dropout rate in colleges especially for minorities is a waste of precious funds on the part of individual families and a waste of resources for colleges.

These points about the policy logic of creating small high schools raise many questions about this popular reform.

Now, I turn finally to NCLB and its policy assumptions and strategies. Let me be clear in my discussion of NCLB. I am not going to praise or condemn the law. As I did with the policy assumptions of computers in classrooms and small high schools, I offer a diagram of the policy logic. As before, I want to make a basic point about the connection between policy assumptions and strategies since it is this linkage that district leaders have to inspect carefully as federal requirements and penalties become painfully evident in schools.

(USE TRANSPARENCY AND GO THROUGH IT WITH GROUP)

POINTS TO MAKE: Go over assumptions and strategies

1. This test-based accountability system aims to raise achievement levels in all schools that receive federal funds

by 2014. Yet in putting the system into practice outcomes inconsistent with its aims emerge. Take a school whose 4th graders began the year mostly reading at the second-grade level and ended up reading at the mid-third grade level after nine months. Teachers of these 4th graders and teachers in other grades who have achieved similar gains with their students would still have failed to meet the NCLB adequate yearly progress (AYP) target in percentage of students in the school that are proficient. Even if that school might have earned state recognition for overall gains in the third and other grades the school would be punished under NCLB by being labeled “needs improvement.”

2. Since AYP is a key strategy that will produce increasing numbers of failing schools, at least 20 states have already decided politically to tip-toe around this requirement. They have pushed the largest gains in student proficiency to occur after 2010 to avoid large numbers of schools failing now. Much like a balloon payment on a mortgage due at the end of 5 or 7 years, the borrower gambles that conditions may change years from now. These state administrators

figure that after nearly a decade of experience with the law NCLB will probably be modified and softened.

Another strategy that Louisiana, Colorado, Connecticut, and Texas have pursued is to lower the cut-off scores thereby increasing the number of students who reach proficiency. These clever political dodges that states create run counter to the NCLB goals, assumptions and strategies.

3. Finally, the law encourages parents, teachers, and administrators to avoid sending their children to schools with large percentages of poor and minority children or even working at such schools. Moreover, NCLB encourages teachers to migrate to schools serving affluent areas. The designers of the law didn't count on these perverse outcomes.
4. What can be done by Washington administrators to avert these negative outcomes of a well-intended law? The Washington state superintendent of instruction has proposed a series of recommendations around loosening regulations on ELL and special education students and

additional funding to improve NCLB implementation. There are other recommendations that the State can pursue.

- A. Establish annual growth targets that are reasonable for the next five or seven years and put off the largest gains for after 2010 since it is likely that NCLB will be substantially altered by then. Nearly half of the states have done that.
- B. Create a performance index that gives schools credit for rate-of-growth in achievement, a move that Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Minnesota, and Vermont have taken. Your State Superintendent had requested that in 2003.
- C. And, finally, spread the word that tests don't measure everything important and that, like polls, have margins of errors.

PAUSE

I have reached the end of my talk. I began with an exchange of messages between a lighthouse and a ship to make two points. Even the best-led and equipped organizations like a U.S. aircraft carrier can make bad

decisions by ignoring both logic and key evidence and that, like an immovable lighthouse signaling ships of dangers one constant in education is the politics of implementing policy in schools and classrooms. I used three popular school reforms, computers in classrooms, small high schools, and NCLB to make these two points.

There is a third point that may well have emerged quietly in your minds as you listened to me: I do assume that superintendents, principals, and program directors come to recognize openly that they are leaders who are expected to figure out the logic and evidence of a school reform and their obligation to make those assumptions, strategies, and evidence available to teachers, parents, board members, and the larger community. Yes, the immovable lighthouse, strange as it may sound, is also a metaphor for leadership. Thank you.