

Leaders Hit the Battlefield for Education's Future: 2009 Eagle Institute

By Nicole Verardi



Fifty new emails. Ten voice messages. Buses running behind schedule. Renovation delays. Budget miracles. Questions from the superintendent. Server crashes. School board meetings.

From 5:30 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. (or later), we jump from one challenge to the next, each one competing for our time. This education triage keeps us focused on making it through the day. But if our eyes are on each footstep, who is watching where we've been . . . and where we are going?

More than 40 esteemed school business officials traveled to Washington, D.C., for the 2009 Eagle Institute, July 14–17, to answer these questions. They examined our past and our future to uncover leadership insights. One of their first stops on this journey was Manassas Battlefield.

Green for the Picking

On July 21, 1861, near Manassas, Virginia, soldiers fought the first major battle of the American Civil War.

Drawing an audience of hundreds of affluent Washingtonians toting picnic lunches, the Union officers predeclared the Battle of Bull Run an easy victory to quickly end the war. But they were wrong.

This misdirected day of glory and entertainment darkened to fierce fighting, and illusions of a quick war were shattered for both sides. The stage was set for a long, bloody struggle.

Why were the expectations so misaligned? One lesson derives from the weight of organizational culture. "Culture eats strategy for lunch every day," according to Jeff McCausland, Ph.D., retired colonel and professor of international law and diplomacy at Pennsylvania State University's Dickinson School of Law.

Before the Civil War, America's last armed conflict was the Mexican-American War, which doesn't compare on scale to the Civil War. And the military leaders who had fought in that war were approaching old age when the Civil War broke out. The two armies that met at the First Battle of Bull Run were completely inexperienced,

green. They had no idea what to expect from their textbook studies of war. The Union army was overconfident and led by inexperienced generals. Although the Confederate army was just as green, it went into the battle with a something-to-prove attitude.

A year later, these same armies met again for the Second Battle of Bull Run. The tough lessons they learned over that year changed their culture and strengthened both armies.

Guided by McCausland and Colonel Tom Vossler, U.S. Army (Ret.), Eagle Institute attendees stepped back more than 100 years to tour the battlefield—site of leadership triumphs and tragedies.

Light Your Own Fire

Initiative. It isn't an easy attribute to cultivate. But it is something you need from your team members. McCausland and Vossler set the stage for the Battle of Bull Run by examining each side's battle preparations. Initiative at this stage could have changed the entire outcome.

To the west, in the Shenandoah Valley, Union General Robert Patterson had 18,000 men. He was ordered to hold Confederate General Joseph Johnston's troops to prevent them from passing through to Manassas to join the other Confederate forces. Worried that he was outnumbered, Patterson failed to complete his objective. He did nothing. In reality, although Patterson feared the numbers of his opposition, it was *his* men who outnumbered the Confederates. Patterson's decision to avoid a risk played a large role in the Union defeat at Bull Run. If he had taken a chance, powered by his own initiative, he could have turned the tables on the battle.

More Battlefield Lessons

After a day of poignant stories about leadership, Eagle Institute participants distilled many lessons in leadership to bring back to their school districts:

- **Build trust.** Leaders with emotional intelligence understand their team members and can better motivate them.
- **Accept the brutal truth.** To make the best decisions, leaders must realistically assess the situation and the organization.
- **Be there.** A leader's physical presence is a critical component of leadership, especially in a crisis. Seeing your leader by your side keeps morale up.
- **Challenge assumptions.** Leaders should avoid the "that's the way we've always done it" approach. Assuming something is true doesn't make it so.
- **Define your mission.** Leaders should bring together all the stakeholders to define the mission and determine who has the authority to execute it. Although the South took this victory, we all know how the story ends. One factor in the Confederates' ulti-



mate failure was lack of preparation. They marched away from this battle without enough food to feed their soldiers and were plagued by supply shortages throughout the war. In education, that's like having interactive whiteboards in buildings that aren't up to code. The lesson: Cover the fundamentals first.

And the Official Leader of Education Is ...

During the wrap-up discussion of the day, attendees debated who is truly "in charge" of education. Who has the authority to execute the mission? Well, it's complicated. The military example of clear chains of command doesn't have an equivalent in education.

In schools, there are superintendents, boards of education, parents, teachers, and students. And don't forget the dueling state and federal governments, as well as the unions. Everyone claims to be the one in charge—but no one has all the power.

Education is on everyone's agenda; however, school business officials play a unique leadership role. From budgets to laws to test scores and beyond, they influence every aspect of education, which is why they must be at the leaders' table for every important discussion.

Back to the Future

Winston Churchill said, "The farther backward you can look, the farther forward you are likely to see." Eagle Institute participants looked so far back that the following day, they were facing forward. Their next stop was the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

CSIS, a public policy research institution, introduced the Seven Revolutions—seven global trends that will shape our future and our roles as leaders. From technology to conflict, these trends hold "hyperpromise," as well as "hyperperil."

The first revolution is population. According to CSIS, during the next 20 years, 80% of the world's population growth will occur in the countries least capable of supporting it—politically, environmentally, or economically.

The developed world faces its own concerns, with aging populations and changing migration patterns. To lead the future of education, we need to be prepared to meet the needs of more immigrant students and to advocate for education funding to an aging population that might not have children in the education system.

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Thanks to technology, the best students and entrepreneurs in the world are no longer limited by geography. According to CSIS, 20 years ago, a B student in Bethesda, Maryland, had an advantage over a genius in Bangalore, India. No longer. Now, it is better to be the genius in Bangalore. What does that mean? It means that we need to have competitive standards and global collaboration. As leaders today, we need to prepare for the next 20 years when brick-and-mortar schools may be on the way out. We need to empower students to create their future.

The Department of Ed Drops In

U.S. Department of Education General Counsel Charles P. Rose joined the Eagle Institute for a working lunch to talk about the department's goals with the stimulus funds. He thanked school business officials for performing the tough job of showing stakeholders the facts relevant to making progress given our financial reality.

Rose shared that Secretary of Education Arne Duncan understands the pivotal role of school business officials, as Duncan relied on his school business official during his time with the Chicago Public Schools.

Lincoln's Leadership Logs

The Eagle Institute ended with a visit to President Abraham Lincoln's Cottage on the campus of the Armed Forces Retirement Home in Washington, D.C., to discover more about leadership from one of America's great leaders. Here's some of what made him a great success:

- **Ambition.** Lincoln learned to read and write on his own. At age 23, he ran for the Illinois legislature with only one year of formal education, no money, and no experience. We all need to reach high to fly high.
- **Critical thinking.** Lincoln spent hours planning, analyzing, preparing, and sorting out priorities. Although this characteristic is not romanticized, it was fundamental to Lincoln's success.
- **Self-control.** Lincoln is known for mastering himself. You must learn to control your own worries because you cannot control events; you must be in command of your actions and reactions.

- **Balance.** "In this troublesome world, we are never quite satisfied," Lincoln wrote in a letter to his wife during his first term in Congress. Throughout his presidency, Lincoln tried to find a balance between work and family. He brought his family to Washington when most other congressmen did not. He then sent them away because he had trouble working. Once they were gone, he missed them and was unhappy. Perhaps this is one area of his leadership that he was never able to master.

A cornerstone of our modern image of Lincoln is based on his infamous cabinet. The Eagle Institute participants debated Lincoln's success in this arena. Although Lincoln created his famous team of rivals, meetings were so contentious that people stopped showing up. Lincoln eventually ignored their advice altogether. Should he have been more aggressive in managing his team? How would this translate to a school district? Would an education leader work to smooth over the rifts among the team members?

Think of the sometimes-heated opinions among your "team" of stakeholders.

Maybe as Lincoln did, the best solution is to ask for their opinions and move forward for the greater good.

Hope in Our Hands

Eagle Institute participants shared a powerful experience of camaraderie, reflection, and optimism for the future. Now that we know where we've been and where we're going, we can lead with a new perspective at a time when our communities need our strong leadership.

"The Eagle Institute experience was the best leadership training opportunity I have ever had," said Margaret F. Boice, deputy superintendent of Norwich City School District in Norwich, New York, and 2008 Eagle Award recipient. "The battlefield tour drew parallels to leadership challenges I tackle in my district, and the thought-provoking look into the future showed me how we must prepare as leaders. I'm already looking forward to next year's exemplary program."

You know what we did last summer. Now mark your calendars to join us this summer for the 2010 Eagle Institute, Tuesday, July 20, 2010, to Friday, July 23, 2010.

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