

Jaded Optimism and Other Critical Elements for 21st Century Educational Leaders

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The job of school leaders is becoming increasingly complex within a context of greater pressure and demands. Thus, effective schools in a democratic society require a great deal from educational leadership. With a focus on creating and maintaining schools that foster equitable and excellent education for each and every child, I see five critical elements for leadership preparation. I call these elements: (1) jaded optimism, (2) joy-filled schools, (3) equity-oriented instructional leadership, (4) access and inclusion, and (5) public advocacy.

Jaded Optimism

School leadership of the 21st century requires skepticism about the state of schools and their continual failures and struggles. School leaders need to understand the depth of the problems schools face, the reality that the short-comings are historic and deeply rooted, and the perspective that there are no silver-bullet or easy solutions. The best leaders I know are “jaded” about what is happening in schools in terms of how marginalized students continue to receive a second-class education—a reality that schools and districts perpetuate. This “jaded” feeling leads to cynicism and inaction without a counterbalance of optimism. This means leaders can simultaneously see the depth of the shortcoming of schools while knowing schools can be fundamentally better. This optimism takes the form of hope and agency—a belief that we can provide each and every child with a world-class education and the feeling that leaders are both responsible for and capable of

making it happen. Jaded optimism is the paradoxical mix necessary to tackle the serious and systemic issues our schools face.

Joy-filled Schools

Schools can and indeed should be places where kids and adults want to be. We seem to have forgotten that learning can and should be engaging, challenging yet enjoyable, and . . . dare I say, fun. A narrowing of instructional methods toward more drill and kill, a narrowing of curriculum often in name of test preparation at the expense of science, arts, recess, etc., has headed our country down a path where more schools are becoming institutions that children and adults are forced to *endure*. In many cases, we as educators and community members have had bad reactions to ill-conceived policy. This combination has led us to collectively lose our heads and forget that rigorous and standards-based learning can sit alongside joy. Educational leadership must vigilantly pose this question in their local communities: What would need to happen in our school to ensure that the children and adults like and want to be here?

Equity-oriented instructional leadership

Schools require effective instructional leaders. Decades of scholarship and practical wisdom support this. However, we see that instructional leadership alone is not enough if we are serious about a democracy where each and every child has meaningful opportunities to be an informed citizen. Instructional leadership needs to be paired with an equity lens or orientation. It is not enough to use data to inform decisions if these decisions are not grounded in questions of equity. It is not enough to do walk-throughs and run curriculum or professional development committees if questions about who is being served well and who is not, who receives the new curriculum and who is missing out, are not purposefully part of those key instructional leadership roles. The 21st century requires a blending of an equity lens with a commitment to instructional leadership.

Access and Inclusion

Related to the equity orientation, school leaders require both a commitment to and an understanding of the access and inclusion issues in our schools. In many ways the discussion and study of achievement gaps has reminded us that those gaps are largely opportunity gaps. Students of color, students from low-income families, students with disabilities, and students learning English experience exclusion and a lack of access over and over again across the country. This has resulted in lesser educational experiences and compromised outcomes. We have no compelling body of evidence that well-taught heterogeneous classrooms cannot produce the same or better outcomes for all students and no compelling body

of evidence that says the grouping, separating, pulling-out, and tracking by ability/disability produces high levels of outcomes for *all* students. Yet, we do have a compelling body of evidence that suggests that access and inclusion matters deeply to both social and academic gains for all students but specifically for marginalized students. A focus of educational leadership preparation needs to include an examination of how schools currently exclude, separate, and segregate particular students paired with knowledge and skills to create service delivery that provides access for all students to rigorous instruction with their peers.

Public Advocate

Like it or not, educational leaders hold very public positions in their communities. And, while every politician is an “education politician” and “committed to children” in election years, our democracy requires an informed and active citizenship focused on children and education every day. School leaders are some of the best-positioned people throughout our country to play a major role in informing our citizenship—to speak about the struggles and triumphs of children and our educational system and to engage their communities authentically. Twenty-first century democracy requires school leaders to have the depth of knowledge around school and other pressing issues and the confidence to engage in that public discussion. Keeping with the commitment to equity and access, school leadership preparation needs to help cultivate skilled, articulate advocates for marginalized children and their families.

As a former public school teacher and principal, I am now a professor who spends a few days each week in schools around the country. I have become increasingly *jaded* about the current state of the schools and the choices we are making. Yet, I am deeply *optimistic* that school leadership is integral to ensuring each and every child attends an equitable and excellent school.

About the Author

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