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Leadership on the Social Frontier: The Role of the Principal in Comprehensive Reform Settings

Peter Miller, Martin Scanlan, and Nathan Wills

Comprehensive school reform increasingly comprises school- and community-based elements to address students' social-emotional and academic needs. Research done on the US Department of Education's [Promise Neighborhoods](#), reveals the kinds of leadership skills that principals need when they are on the frontier of such change.

Numerous education reform programs in recent years have called for strategic inter-organizational and cross-sector responses to meet students' complex needs. Rather than relying simply on school-based action to help students thrive, efforts to address matters such as poverty, health, and safety in the neighborhoods and communities where students live are increasingly included in education initiatives. These out-of-school matters, if left

unaccounted for, have negative effects upon school practices and outcomes. As plans for comprehensive school-community changes unfold in diverse settings, those who occupy traditional leadership positions—especially school principals—must consider how their daily roles and practices might expand or even change. Examples from our recent research on [Promise Neighborhoods](#) illuminate the work of principals in comprehensive school-community reform settings, which we refer to as social frontiers.

School-Community Collaboration and the Comprehensive Reform Era

The work of principals entails wide-ranging duties that are based within, but not limited

Efforts to address matters such as poverty, health, and safety in the neighborhoods and communities where students live are increasingly included in education initiatives.

Just the Facts

- Education literature is replete with studies that address school-community collaboration (Sanders, 2009) and indicate that when schools develop connections with parents, community-based organizations, universities, and other partners, they can improve their capacities to serve students.
- Warren, Hong, Rubin, and Uy (2009), for example, describe partnerships as increasingly moving “beyond the bake sale” toward the engagement of both school-specific issues like student achievement as well as substantive family and community issues of health and safety.
- Such perspectives reflect a recognition that poverty and educational inequities are inextricably linked (Berliner, 2014) and that education, social, and economic policies and practices are entwined ([Orfield](#), 2013).
- Full-service community schools (FSCS) and area-based initiatives (ABI) are among the most noteworthy embodiments of this broadened stream of work on school-community engagement. Both approaches are based on the recognition that students can best thrive when their broader life situations are healthy and stable.
- Sociologist Ronald Burt (1992) coined the term *social frontiers* for places “where two social worlds meet, where people of one kind meet people of another kind” (p. 163). Burt suggested that work on social frontiers—contexts that are rife with diversity and difference—is often characterized by conflict, negotiation, and cross-cultural meaning-making.
- Network diversity is often paramount on social frontiers because contacts with “new” types of people and places bring new types of information and opportunities (Burt, 1992).

to, their own school buildings. Although some of principals' chief roles are to serve as instructional leaders, personnel managers, and facilitators of professional development, they are also responsible for developing bonds with families and collaborating with other schools and organizations in their local communities.

Education literature is replete with studies that address school-community collaboration (Sanders, 2009) and indicate that when schools develop connections with parents, community-based organizations, universities, and other partners, they can improve their capacities to serve students. Previously accepted notions of how—and to what effect—schools, families, and communities are to interact have actually expanded in some recent strands of research. Warren, Hong, Rubin, and Uy (2009), for example, described partnerships as increasingly moving “beyond the bake sale” toward the engagement of both school-specific issues such as student achievement as well as substantive family and community issues of health and safety. Such broadened perspectives reflect a recognition that poverty and educational inequities are inextricably linked (Berliner, 2014) and that education, social, and economic policies and practices are entwined (Orfield, 2013). These perspectives challenge principals to reconsider both where and how to invest their resources.

FSCS and ABI

Full-service community schools (FSCS) and area-based initiatives (ABI) are among the most noteworthy embodiments of the emphasis on school-community engagement. Both approaches are based on the recognition that students can best thrive when their broader life situations are healthy and stable. In situations where health and stability are consistently at risk, FSCS and ABI seek to actively develop, join, and coordinate diverse resources to improve students' chances to thrive. FSCS are sometimes known as “one-stop shops,” where students and families can receive not only “regular” academic opportunities, but also resources such as childcare, language services, and medical care.

[The Children's Aid Society of New York](#) is perhaps the most noteworthy leader in FSCS development, having facilitated thousands of these schools in the United States and beyond since 1994.

ABI are similar to FSCS in providing many social and educational offerings, but instead of being located under one roof, they comprise multiple independent, strategically linked organizations in a defined area. The [Harlem Children's Zone](#) was a trailblazer in this regard and is undoubtedly the most well-known ABI in the United States.

The intrigue and the promise of ambitious school-community collaboration models, such as FSCS and ABI, are accompanied by a range of concerns regarding how and to what extent they can be brought to scale. The successes of the [Harlem Children's Zone](#), for example, have been difficult to replicate in other settings. One of the challenges in making such work come to fruition is understanding how traditional school actors can best contribute to the efforts. Is “being a principal” fundamentally different in FSCS and ABI settings? What leadership practices emerge as most essential? How is principal effectiveness conceptualized?

Promise Neighborhoods

We are studying [Promise Neighborhoods](#) in urban, rural, and tribal areas throughout the United States in an attempt to answer such questions. Promise Neighborhoods are US Department of Education (ED)-funded ABI that aim to ensure that children will have “access to effective schools and strong systems of family and community support that will prepare them to attain an excellent education and successfully transition to college and career” ([US Department of Education](#), 2010). Promise Neighborhoods call for community-based nonprofit organizations or institutions of higher education to operate or partner with at least one school and to design a continuum of social and educational services in a geographically defined neighborhood. Between 2010 and 2012, ED awarded 58 separate Promise Neighborhood planning and implementation grants. Most of those (47) were awarded to urban communi-

ties, but others were given to rural (8) and tribal (3) applicants.

We focus on [Promise Neighborhoods](#) because they are a prominent federal program (they were a centerpiece of President Obama's education agenda), but even more so, because we foresee a rapidly expanding terrain of holistic school-community reform in the United States and want to learn about the everyday implications for principals, teachers, and others who work on or amid such efforts. This includes not just those few whose communities were able to secure Promise Neighborhood grants, but also thousands of others who seek collaborative ways to cultivate educational opportunity amid heightened poverty and marginalization.

Social Frontiers

Principals need new ways to make sense of comprehensive school-community reform settings. We find the metaphor of “social frontiers” to be a helpful tool toward this end. Sociologist Ronald Burt coined the term *social frontiers* for places “where two social worlds meet, where people of one kind meet people of another kind” (p. 163). Burt suggested that work on social frontiers—contexts that are rife with diversity and difference—is often characterized by conflict, negotiation, and cross-cultural meaning-making.

[Promise Neighborhoods](#) function as social frontiers in which people of different professions and social worlds interact and work together. While still teaming with others who are predominantly like themselves (e.g., principals collaborating with other school personnel) or pursuing organization-specific goals/outcomes (e.g., principals focusing upon student achievement and school resource allotment), leaders on social frontiers are also challenged to expand their collaborative orientations and core objectives.

For example, the 21 Promise Neighborhood sites that were funded in the initial round of grants cited, on average, more than 12 organizational partners each from a diverse array of sectors. Those sites averaged more than four community-based organiza-

tions (4.19) and more than three elementary, middle, or high schools (3.33) as partners. They also named governmental agencies (1.9) and colleges/universities (1.0) as collaborators.

The partners from every Promise Neighborhood site were diverse not only in conceptual emphases (education, health, policy, and so on) but also in their range of influence, meaning that partners included frontline service organizations that directly engage families and students on a daily basis as well as direction-setting organizations that shape broader public policies and understandings. Because of that diversity, principals who work on these social frontiers must be able to understand and skillfully engage many nonschool partners—most of whom have very different organizational cultures and accountabilities.

Those same Promise Neighborhoods sought to increase academic achievement in their schools, but also to accomplish much more. More than 75% (16 of 21) of the programs cited family and student health goals, 9 mentioned community economic development goals, and over half (11 of 21) identified college readiness goals. It is difficult to assess how far the sites have come in reaching some of these diverse goals since 2010 (some of the sites have yet to implement many of their plans), but the sheer breadth of their aims highlights how this education reform encapsulates much more than school matters.

Principals on Frontiers: Diverse Approaches

Leaders successfully navigate frontiers by engaging in creative, divergent thinking, not by following a recipe. The Promise Neighborhoods that we have worked with and studied in recent years all endorse the logic and efficacy of holistic, school-community reform, but they take quite different approaches to accomplishing that reform. For example, the urban Promise applications that were funded over three years are located in areas with considerably larger populations and pools of organizational resources than those of the rural and tribal applicants. In turn, although much of the leadership work in the urban social frontiers revolved around negotiating and

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coordinating existing resources, matters of resource creation and development emerged as more important in the rural sites.

Another noteworthy difference across sites is the structures of the schools within the zones. Most sites were occupied by traditional public schools and, as a result, required principals to integrate regular administrative roles such as instructional guidance and teacher management with the more community-embedded collaborative responsibilities associated with Promise Neighborhood action. Several sites, however, followed the Harlem Children's Zone model more closely and centered charter schools within their neighborhoods. Principals in those sites were largely free of school district attachments and, in many instances, more fully immersed in the community collaboration side of things.

Our research across the range of Promise

Neighborhoods has neither led us to defining a principal archetype nor delineating a standard principal experience. Instead, we have identified four broad social frontier considerations for principals across these diverse settings. Reflecting on these considerations can foster deeper understanding of how principals' work unfolds not only in Promise Neighborhoods but also on other social frontiers of education reform as well.

Broadening Perspectives on Relationship Networks

All successful principals attempt to foster tightly-knit networks of trusting relationships within their school buildings. They purposefully develop structures and routines that allow teachers, administrators, and other school personnel to interact regularly and, in turn, to know and understand each other well. Clearly, such efforts are well-founded, as abundant research indicates that they can help lead to increased student learning.

However, principals who work on social frontiers of education reform are called to go further to broaden their perspectives on professional relationship networks. Network diversity is often paramount on social frontiers because contacts with new types of people and places bring new types of information and opportunities (Burt, 1992). School principals in Promise Neighborhoods and other school-community collaborative contexts must continue to nurture relationships within their buildings, while at the same time emerging as central "bridgers" (organizational boundary spanners) within their larger partnership structures. When principals connect with neighboring after-school program providers, for example, the principals not only learn about specific resources and opportunities that they can provide for their students but they also cultivate rich community monitoring and feedback mechanisms. Their new social frontier colleagues can offer fresh perspectives on students' out-of-school realities.

Connecting Core Work Across Programs and Sectors

School-community collaboration has traditionally been discussed largely in light of its potential

contributions to teaching and learning, which is the core work of schools. While pursuing this core work, principals working on social frontiers are challenged to simultaneously consider the values, purposes, and desired outcomes of their partners in the collaborative. We have found Promise Neighborhood participants to consistently express a fundamental commitment to cultivating opportunities for students and families. We find less consensus on how these participants understand their partners' work. Even less common were understandings of how their own organizations' core work specifically related to and/or contributed to their cross-sector colleagues' work.

On the social frontier, leaders must not only identify how their own organizations can benefit from participating with others, but they must also be able to conceptualize, value, and clearly articulate partnership outcomes or benefits that may not even be tracked or evaluated in their own setting. Principals, for example, should be aware of the general standards to which their healthcare partners are held accountable, and they should be able to describe (to diverse internal and external stakeholders) how those standards intersect with the work and accountabilities of the school.

Collaborating Effectively With Partners

A third consideration involves creating effective processes of collaboration. Leadership on social frontiers often depends upon brokering and negotiating conflict. Although partners may agree on general objectives, they tend to have different ideas about *how* to best reach those objectives and to have unique subgoals nested within the larger initiatives. For instance, in Promise Neighborhoods, all partners espouse student and community development, but they frequently have divergent (even conflicting) ideas about what to do to promote it. As one local leader put it, "Everyone gives lip service to (collaboration), but it is not really a common practice in the everyday world of implementation services." Many Promise Neighborhoods lend insufficient time and attention to determining how people from different organizations and sectors will navigate the every-

day challenges of working together. As a result, the enthusiasm that partners share about big ideas like student opportunity and community improvement can be squashed by misunderstandings and frustrations about the nuts and bolts of collaboration.

Principals can play central roles in helping all partners negotiate these matters of process, as well as ensuring that partners don't miss the forest for the trees. Particularly in the initial phases of collaboration, principals are positioned to raise key questions such as: How, when, and where will we communicate? Do we want a "big dog" who leads the partnership or a flat hierarchy? Who can take the reins when personnel transitions happen (because we know they will)? What do we need to know about each others' operative norms? What short-and long-term data will inform us about how we are doing?

Looking Beyond Harlem for Models of Practice

A final consideration emerging in this work is that social frontiers are diverse, and successful practices for one do not always neatly map onto others. What works in some urban settings, such as the Harlem Children's Zone, for example, does not necessarily translate to other places. Social frontiers of education reform vary in their spatial dynamics—urban sites address a couple square miles and some rural and tribal ones encompass thousands of square miles. They also vary in the abundance of organizations and resources—more are available in urban zones than rural ones, usually—and in the make-up of populations that they serve—some zones are racially and ethnically homogenous and others are not. Principals and other key leaders on social frontiers can learn much from the Harlem Children's Zone, but they can glean especially relevant examples and insights from those who are operating in settings that are comparable to their own.

For example, leaders from a rural Promise Neighborhood in Wisconsin spent two years of intensive learning about ABI. They designed group sessions to discuss books about the Harlem Children's Zone, participated in conference calls with big-city Promise Neighborhood leaders, and

attended conferences in Washington, DC, to hear ED's perspectives. But the richest learning experiences for the rural leaders occurred during a two-day visit they made to Berea, KY, where another rural Promise Zone was alive and thriving. The Wisconsin leaders explained that after two years of trying to learn about ABI, "everything clicked" when they saw the work happening in a place like their own.

Conclusion

As students' opportunities to thrive are more clearly understood to be associated with conditions both in and out of school, principals are increasingly called to navigate social frontiers. These frontiers are places where different people and different organizations intersect and where communication, negotiation, conflict resolution, and entrepreneurship take center stage. Key considerations for leadership on these social frontiers are to:

- Broadly pursue relational networks
- Connect the core work of schools to the work of partnering organizations
- Attend to the details of effective collaboration
- Look for models of practice in diverse spaces.

We see such social frontiers in the most notable examples of comprehensive school-community reform, such as full-service community schools and Promise Neighborhood ABIs. Yet more than ever, principals in diverse urban, suburban, rural, and tribal communities throughout the United States are addressing complex student and family needs by fostering partnerships beyond their school buildings. These principals can be seen as not just as keepers of schools, but as central players in the cultivation of community-wide opportunity—as leaders navigating social frontiers. **PRR**

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