

BY
THOMAS J.
SERGIOVANNI

REFOCUSING
LEADERSHIP
TO BUILD
COMMUNITY

The principal's greatest challenge and primary responsibility is to develop a caring community in the school, a place where strong character emerges from shared purpose that allows and encourages students to be successful learners.

I recently came across a program for the Conversation (conference) of the International Network of Principals' Centers held in Sitka, Alaska, in 1993. The theme of the Sitka conversation was "Transforming Schools into True Communities." As part of the program participants were assigned to home groups of approximately 12 persons to reflect together and to share their thinking about community and other issues. Stuffed into the pages of the program were notes I had made of what I had heard as I visited with several of the different home groups.

Eddie Pearson, a principal from Florida, talked about the suffering and shared pain he and others experienced after Hurricane Andrew hit, which led to a struggle to build community. He concluded that despite the values of individualism that are so pervasive in our schools and in other segments of our society it was okay, even desirable, to depend on others. Shared dependency, he observed, builds community by getting the connections among people right. >>

Eddie was onto something. Individualism adds strength, stirs our creative juices, and provides us with an insurance policy against blind conformity. This policy can be liberating. At the same time members of every society, and every school within society, need to be connected by a common framework and committed to some common good. Connections and commitment are the means by which students and adults alike find sense and meaning in their lives and find the resources needed to persist when times are tough, to look ahead to brighter days, to meet life's challenges, and to be successful with life's endeavors. Communities in our schools, families, churches, and other places work well for everyone when this common good is inclusive. When connections and inclusivity are worked out in a way that individualism does not suffer, a value fundamental to our democratic society comes alive. This value, civic virtue, calls on us to willingly sacrifice our self-interest for the common good.

Amitai Etzioni (1996) uses the metaphor "mosaic" to show how both individualism and the common good can be brought together. A mosaic is made up of many individual pieces, each with a unique shape and color. But it is held together by a common frame and glue. Without this frame and glue the mosaic falls apart. Civic virtue is, unfortunately, in short supply in too many high schools and the frame and glue needed to hold everything together is crumbling.

THE CHALLENGE TO BUILD COMMUNITY

John Morris, a principal from Toronto, said that being called to serve, being called to give more than is usually expected, is a sure-fire leadership strategy for building community. He told a story about the enormous response his school gave to the influx of children from "boat people" as a result of recent immigration to Canada. This challenge and the school's response brought parents, students, and teachers together as a viable and effective community. Things really clicked in his school. People really cared about each other. Individual initiatives were encouraged and respected. Motivation and commitment were high. Things got done effectively and efficiently. Challenges were met. New ways of operating were invented. Solutions to problems abounded. Sense and meaning filled the air. But after about seven years things turned back to normal. In his words, "We lost it—we became a school again." Why is it that our present structures for schooling are so enduring? Why is change in schools so hard to maintain? What can principals do to keep the momentum going, to prevent regression to the mean over time? Can we really "break ranks" and build a new theory for the high school that is more academically engaging and productive for students and is more car-

ing and inclusive for everyone? Down deep John Morris thinks so and I agree. But it will take some risks and a different kind of leadership.

Ora and Chaur, two principals from Jerusalem, offered this insight. When we let kids know that they are needed, that we adults are depending on them to help us with everything that goes on in the school, then we are calling them to serve. With this call we are on the road to community building. When students and parents know they are needed, everyone pulls together and the common good emerges. This good provides not just a safety net but a launching pad for new initiatives in both learning and caring, being and doing.

A sense of place is important to students—particularly high school students. Ellen Hayes pointed out that without a sense of place not only students but all of us feel lost, feel disconnected, feel that we do not belong. Most would agree with her observations. Yet, we continue to operate large high schools with the free-range theory that allows students to wander anywhere and

everywhere. When students belong anywhere and everywhere, in reality they belong nowhere. So on their own, students carve the school into small pieces to make places they can call their own. But instead of building a sense of community in the tradition of a mosaic, these separate student-assigned places fragment, divide, balkanize, isolate, even alienate. In the suburbs we call students who hang out together in the same place *cliques* and in our urban centers we call them *gangs*.

STRIVING FOR GENUINE COMMUNITY

I learned something else in my visits to the various home groups at the Sitka conversation. I learned what may *not* be community. Many of the participants shared experiences they had had on rope courses, in weekend retreats, and in similar settings. They described the sense of community that emerged as everyone was involved in these activities. They talked about self-development, personal growth, inner being, and the like, and the special connections they enjoyed with other people who were seeking the same thing. Some talked about the sense of community they experienced in support groups when they faced a crisis. These experiences are helpful and at least in a vicarious way give us a sense of what community feels like. But are such community experiences authentic or synthetic? The answer, I think, lies in the motivation for being together in the first place.

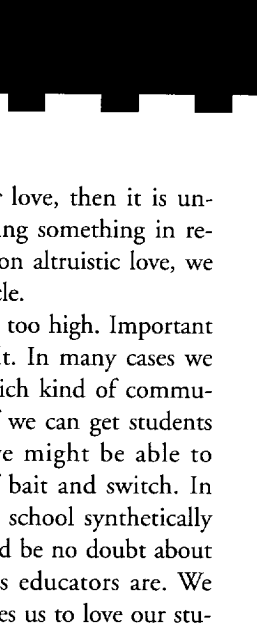
Let's take that support group, for example. If the motivation is based on *egocentric* love then we may be dealing with synthetic rather than authentic community. Many people participate in support groups to get their own needs met. Self-gratification is the prime motivator. Once needs are met or when needs are no longer being met, the motivation for participating disappears and so does the participation. But

when motivation is based on *altruistic* love, then it is unselfish giving to others without expecting something in return. When community ties are based on altruistic love, we are more likely to have the genuine article.

It would be a mistake to set the bar too high. Important opportunities may be missed as a result. In many cases we may not want to be too fussy over which kind of community we are able to create in schools. If we can get students hooked on school for one reason, we might be able to change that reason later—a version of bait and switch. In short, getting some kids involved with school synthetically may be a major victory. But there should be no doubt about what our own personal motivations as educators are. We have a professional obligation that obliges us to love our students unconditionally, to accept them unconditionally—all our students whether they are smart or not so smart, pretty or not so pretty, athletic or not so athletic, cool or not so

conviction, steadiness, and unique qualities of style and substance that distinguish these persons. Key to this list of characteristics is the importance of substance, distinctive qualities, and moral underpinnings. Leaders with character anchor their practice in ideas, values, and commitments, bring to their practice distinctive qualities of style and substance, and can be trusted to be morally diligent in advancing the integrity of the enterprises they lead.

Character as an individual concept linked to leadership is similar to character as an organizational concept linked to a school's culture. Schools with character, for example, have unique cultures. They know who they are, have developed a common understanding of their purposes, and have faith in their ability to celebrate this uniqueness as a powerful way to achieve their goals. Key to their success is for parents, students, and teachers to have control over their own destinies and to have developed distinctive norms and approaches for



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What about academics, one might correctly ask. How does student learning fit into the picture? Right in the middle. There is no inconsistency between developing a respectful and caring community characterized by unconditional love and developing an intellectually rich community with a strong academic focus that demands a great deal from students and gives them a great deal in return. In fact, the two are interdependent—and the right kind of leadership from principals, chairs, and teachers can bring together both the academic focus and personalization needed for all students to succeed at learning, to prepare for their citizenship roles, and to be personally responsive to their obligations.

SCHOOLS OF CHARACTER

Perhaps the most important quality in an effective school is its character (for an extended discussion of the relationship between school character and student achievement see Sergiovanni in press). Considering school character is no different from considering individual character. When we think of leaders with character, our thoughts point to integrity, reliability, moral excellence, a sense of purpose, firmness of

realizing their goals. Both control and distinctiveness distinguish schools with character from schools where character is in short supply. Both control and distinctiveness enhance purpose, identity, and meaning for organizational participants. In short, a school has character when there is consistency between that school's purposes, values and needs, and its decisions and actions.

School character builds when certain virtues are incorporated into its culture. Fullinwider (1986) divides the virtues into four groups: "(1) the moral virtues—honesty, truthfulness, decency, courage, justice; (2) the intellectual virtues—thoughtfulness, strength of mind, curiosity; (3) the communal virtues—neighborliness, charity, self-support, helpfulness, cooperativeness, respect for others; (4) the political virtues—commitment to the common good, respect for law, responsible participation" (p. 6). The virtues provide a framework for looking ahead and providing leadership, and for looking back to take stock and evaluate progress.

School character is important because it is linked to effectiveness. School effectiveness can be broadly defined as achieving higher levels of pedagogical thoughtfulness, developing relationships characterized by caring and civility, and achieving increases in the quality of student performance. The relationship between school character and this definition of school effectiveness has been well documented (see, for >>

example, Bryk and Driscoll 1988; Hill, Foster, and Gendler 1990; Sergiovanni, 1994; Meier, 1995; Bryk et al. 1998). Character adds value to a school by contributing to the development of various forms of human capital. Two particularly important forms are social capital and academic capital. Social capital consists of norms, obligations, and trusts that are generated by relationships among people in a community, neighborhood, or society (Coleman 1988, 1990). When students have access to social capital they find the support needed for learning. But when social capital is not available students generate it for themselves by turning more and more to the student subculture for support. The too-frequent result is the development of norms and codes of behavior that work against what schools are trying to do. This seeking of support elsewhere often takes its toll on both academic performance and social behavior.

Schools develop academic capital by becoming focused communities that cultivate a deep culture of teaching and

learning. The rituals, norms, commitments, and traditions of this culture become the framework that motivates and supports student learning and development. In focused communities teaching and learning provide the basis for making important school decisions. Leaders in focused communities are committed to the principle that "form should follow function" with function defined by school goals and purposes. In a focused community there is a strong and clear commitment to academic achievement as evidenced by rigorous academic work, teachers' personal concern for student success, and the expectations that students will work hard, come to class prepared, and complete assignments (see, for example, Sebring and Bryk 1996).

Research on schools that are successful in promoting achievement points to both academic focus and community as important factors. The two contribute to the development and strengthening of a school's organizational character. In a sense, both caring and learning become interdependent as academic and social capital do their work (see, for example, Sebring and Bryk 1996). But neither caring nor learning can be scripted. Both must emerge from the school's sense of what is important, the school's inventory of values and purposes, the school's commitment to do well, and other cultural concerns that provide a school with character.

What are the characteristics of schools that provide opportunities for social and academic capital to emerge, and to work together to help that school become a focused and caring community that contributes to student learning? In reviewing the research on the relationship between various forms of capital development and school effectiveness Paul Hill and Mary Celio (1998) identify the following characteristics: "small school size, personalization, high expectations for all

students regardless of family background, teacher collaboration, aggressive leadership, simplicity of the curriculum, consistent standards for student behavior and effort, and family and peer group support" (p. 30). All these characteristics are related to building community in one form or another. Key to community building is connections, and key to connections are academic engagement and personal commitment. Both academic engagement and personal commitment are related to higher levels of civility and student learning.

IMPLICATIONS FOR LEADERSHIP

Are there leadership lessons to be learned from all this? I think so, particularly if we are going to take *Breaking Ranks* (NASSP 1996) seriously. In his home group at the Sitka conversation Glen Olds pointed the way to the kind of leadership we need in our schools. He mused that the problem with today's leadership is that principals are being called upon by their districts and by the state to succeed rather than

to serve—when in fact, the way to succeed as a leader is to serve. Serve what? The answer, I think, is ideas in the form of purposes, a sense of why a school is unique, what parents and students value, how we want to live our lives together in the school, what is worth knowing, what our commitments and obligations are, what standards are important to us as a school community—ideas that not only point the way but link teachers, students, parents, and principals together as threads in a fabric composed of reciprocal role responsibilities and moral commitments.

Leadership in schools should be idea based. The source of authority for a principal's leadership practice and for the leadership practice of others in the school should be that school's sense of the common good and the promises and obligations that good requires from everyone. Why is this view of leadership so important? Because idea-based leadership calls on everyone—teachers, parents, and students—to join the principal in accepting responsibility for what happens in the school. As ideas and common commitments are shared, so is leadership. No, not ordinary leadership but one that is distinctly moral.

Locating the source of authority for leadership in ideas rather than just in bureaucratic things, or especially rather than in just the principal's personality (as exemplified, for example, in his or her ability to use the right leadership style or to press the right motivational buttons) is the way to build a civil society within the school—a community where everyone belongs, feels responsible for the success of the school, and willingly meets their obligations to the school and its ideas. With ideas as the source of authority and an idea-based leadership in place, a shared followership emerges. Though role responsibilities differ, administrators, teachers, parents, and

students are equally obliged to embody the school's idea structure in their actions as members of this shared followership.

The relationships among shared commitments, personal attractiveness of the leader, and followership are illustrated below. Note that followership in a school is high when personal attractiveness of

FIGURE 1

Shared Commitments, Personal Attractiveness and Followership

	Personally Based Leadership	Morally Based Leadership	
High	Followership may be high as long as P is high P+ I-	Followership is high P+ I+	
Personal Attractiveness of the Leader (P)			
	Followership is low P- I-	Followership is high even when P is low P- I+	
Low			High
	Shared Commitment to Ideas and Values (I)		

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the leader and shared commitment to ideas and values are high. But followership *is also high* in the lower right-hand quadrant where personal attractiveness is low, but commitment to shared ideas and values is high. With ideas at the center and bureaucratic matters and personality pushed to the periphery, school character grows and the ingredients are right for academic and social capital to do their work by raising levels of civility, decency, caring, academic focus, and student success. The *sine qua non* in this chain of events is moral leadership and moral responsiveness—first from the principal and eventually as an interdependent part of the school's culture. *Breaking Ranks* can provide a blueprint for this kind of leadership and a blueprint for this vision of schooling. Maybe it is time to dust off its covers.

Thomas J. Sergiovanni (tsergiou@trinity.edu) is Radford Professor of Education and Administration and senior fellow, Center for Educational Leadership at Trinity University, San Antonio, Tex. **HSM**

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