

Chapter 1

Applying Strategic Leadership in Educational Contexts: A Professional Perspective

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ABSTRACT

This chapter provides a professional perspective of the relevance and necessity of strategic leadership in PK-12 settings. As school systems continue to evolve, it will be paramount that school leaders are strategic in the way they lead. Specifically, school leaders must be deliberate and thoughtful in the decisions they make, in order to ensure maximum success. This has become even more important in a high-stakes environment in which student scores and organizational efficiency is often linked to job performance. This type of leadership employs a multifaceted approach, which requires leading through a variety of contexts, as well as recognizing and leveraging the ability to effectively collaborate and make intentional decisions that are evidenced-based. If the aforementioned traits are balanced and appropriately executed, educational leaders will be well positioned to experience significant and positive outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

In education, the discussion of leadership typically implies a singular approach to guiding individuals within an organization towards a certain outcome. Furthermore, when leaders attend leadership training, it is often to add knowledge or tools to existing leadership styles. This is certainly a good thing; however, this type of training often lacks the next phase of leadership development, which is “How leadership should be applied?” Without this missing link, leaders often divert to a one-dimensional approach to leadership, potentially limiting their effectiveness as a leader. This speaks to the topic of this chapter, which is strategic leadership in education. Strategic leadership involves taking ideas or concepts from a broader perspective, in order to view, evaluate, and plan for future outcomes (Davies, 2011). Being a strategic leader requires leaders to be forward planners. Strategic leaders are effective in team building, unbiased, action oriented, and base decisions on evidence and research (Quong & Walker, 2010). Much of the literature related to strategic leadership in education lacks ample clarity and direction in terms of taking a more applied approach to strategic leadership in education. This chapter will provide fundamental information related to this topic, and serve to provide basic perspective for practice, for both existing and emerging leaders.

BACKGROUND

As school systems continue to evolve, it will become vitally important that school leaders are strategic in the way they lead. As stated, school leaders must be deliberate and thoughtful in the decisions they make, in order to ensure success within their organization. This has never been more important than in what has become known as “high stakes” environments. In a “high stakes” environment, student scores, and organizational outcomes are often linked to job performance and overall organizational health. Given this, school leaders must have the ability to think and act strategically in environments where contexts are continually evolving (Marturano & Gosling, 2007, O’Connor, 2016).

So, why is this important? Strategic leadership is grounded in both rational and intentional decision-making protocols. That is, having clear reasoning behind decisions being made, with the intent of achieving an optimal or desired outcome. This requires moving beyond a standard leadership framework, and being adaptable to whatever may be presented. Strategic leadership allows leaders to see organizational components as interconnected and is often related to change (Center for Creative Leadership, 2004). Typically, leadership manuscripts focus on more formal approaches to management. However, in this chapter, a more practical approach to strategic leadership is discussed.

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP: GETTING STARTED

In schools, strategic leaders are typically involved in five key activities: direction setting, executing strategy to action, developing capacity in staff, determining effective interventions, and developing strategic capabilities (Davies & Davies, 2006). Following these elements is one of many ways to establish a more strategic approach to leadership. In extending this ideology, the following questions should be considered:

- Where are we headed?

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