
Preface to the Second Edition

As a school leader, you have a lot to do and little time to spare. There's the governor's demand that you close the achievement gap. There's pressure to join Race to the Top (RTTT). And, of course, your board members often fall out among themselves or with you, while parents request expensive new programs that your taxpayers are often reluctant to support. You have a lot on your plate. Why should you spend any of your time on another book about school leadership? Because the world is changing. You won't be able to get by with yesterday's ideas. Many of the lessons in this book can make a difference in children's lives . . . and some of them may save your career. This orientation introduces you to how that world is changing and what it means for you and the schools you lead.

So, you're sitting at the school superintendent's desk, or you aspire to be behind it. Congratulations. It's a wonderful profession. Your career choice is a sign of your commitment to young people and your community. It's a good feeling, isn't it? Your family is proud of you. Your neighbors look up to you. But what are you going to do if any of the following scenarios unfolds?

- Directed by your board to bring student achievement up to national norms, you've created a national profile for your leadership. But the price has been high. Contention with principals and the teachers' union has alarmed and divided the board. And this morning, your finance director drops a bombshell. The district is facing an immediate \$40 million budget hole, a consequence, apparently, of the new computer system's inability to work with the old financial program. Your job is on the line.

- Asked to make a presentation to the local business community about student achievement, you turn to your research director for data. What you learn is alarming. As you work through the numbers with her, it becomes apparent that respectable districtwide averages disguise an

alarming achievement gap. The correlation between student performance and family income is almost perfect. You can bury this information in your presentation, but can you live with yourself?

- At a public meeting, a local activist stands up to harangue you. Research says the public is paying more for education and getting less, he reports. American standing on international assessments has fallen off the cliff. You and your buddies are putting the nation at risk. How do you respond?
- Your worst nightmare as an educator comes to life. In the middle of routine meetings one morning, you learn of a shooting at one of your elementary schools. Soon, it emerges that a deranged gunman with an assault rifle has murdered 20 six- and seven-year-olds, six staff members, and his mother before killing himself. How do you help heal this shattered community?
- The telephone rings as you return from lunch with the union president. It's the local reporter who's been questioning district spending on technology. Today, he has a new issue. Parents at one of your elementary schools are picketing the school about a library exhibit on the family. It seems the exhibit includes pictures of gay couples and their children. What do you say?
- Newly elected board members realize that an oversight on the previous board's part coupled with a new court ruling offers the board the opportunity to terminate your contract. Unceremoniously, you are deprived of your title and your office and find yourself assigned to an empty desk without a telephone, a computer, or any work. Several months later, you are informed that your services are no longer required in the district in any capacity. How do you protect yourself from that?

There's nothing theoretical about any of these scenarios. Working with more than 300 superintendents in the past 20 years, the authors of this volume have encountered each of them. And many of these developments cost someone a job. We could cite dozens of similar examples. The truth is that the high-minded pursuit of what's best for children often runs into the rough realities of budget catastrophes, interest-group politics, human folly, and the residue and by-products of the nation's racial past. School superintendents have to be prepared to confront and deal with these challenges.

That's why this book is important. As a potential or current superintendent, you must understand that what you do not know can kill you professionally. The world is changing. Your world as an educator is changing with it. Where once school superintendents could be content to define themselves as managers, today, they must understand that they are leaders of learning who are simultaneously public figures. This *Fieldbook* can help you cope with these challenges. It is called a *fieldbook* because it draws on the stories and accumulated wisdom and experience of more than 300 school leaders—members of either the National Superintendents Roundtable or the Danforth Foundation's Forum for the American School

Superintendent—as they struggled with the problems of leading today’s schools. (See Appendices B and C for list of these leaders.)

WHAT’S DIFFERENT ABOUT THE SECOND EDITION?

Whenever authors ask readers to deal with a second edition of a book, they have an obligation to explain what’s different in the new volume. We want to point to several things. First, the school policy and political environment has changed with warp speed since our first edition went to press in 2004. Even then, it was clear that accountability and assessment were becoming new hallmarks of American education, but these developments have since accelerated at a jaw-dropping rate. Today, in addition to a transformed policy environment, you face new pressures for privatization and the challenges of dealing with the wild card of technology.

Second, this volume adds the experience of 100 school leaders active in the superintendency in the last five years to the lessons learned from 200 superintendents who contributed to the first volume.

Readers familiar with the first volume will also find that the book has been dramatically changed to reflect the latest thinking in learning and assessment, including the emerging debate about performance-based teacher compensation.

All told, readers will find more than 100 pages of new and reshaped material in this second edition of the *Fieldbook*, most developed by members of the National Superintendents Roundtable, and the elimination or reduction of a comparable amount of other material from the original.

Over some 20 years, the 300 superintendents who helped us develop this *Fieldbook* and its predecessor worked extremely hard. They examined the latest research on brain development and tried to understand how it applies to early learning and school programs. They worried about how to respond to public demands for higher standards and new assessments. They fretted about how to defend a system in which they believed while the broader environment criticized it. They explored district governance with their boards and unions. And they wrestled with the challenges of race and class in the United States, the great fault lines in our national life. Although four of us developed this book, in a very real sense, these superintendents wrote it. You’ll find their stories and the lessons of their experience here.

WHO THIS BOOK IS FOR

We developed *The Superintendent’s Fieldbook: A Guide for Leaders of Learning* with several audiences in mind:

- School superintendents in districts of all kinds (urban, rural, and suburban) who want to ratchet up their effectiveness will find this text a

valuable resource. If you're a superintendent, this is the book you need as you struggle with the demanding leadership responsibilities of your position. Here, you'll learn how to work with your board, deal with your union, and engage with your public in your high-profile job. We've also got advice on how to craft a newsworthy statement, tackle the media interview, and respond to critics of American public schools.

- Teachers, administrators, and deputy superintendents who are interested in moving into the superintendent's chair will gain a sense of the job's challenges. Experience is a great teacher. One definition of experience is *learning by making mistakes*. Most of the school leadership mistakes that can be made have been made by the authors and contributors to this volume. Learn from them without the pain. Among other things, here you'll learn how to land that first job, craft an entry plan, and work with principals and teachers to advance student learning.

- Principals interested in enhancing their own leadership will find a lot to use in this *Fieldbook*. Here, you can explore school-level issues of leadership, public engagement, collaboration, and how to create better learning environments.

- School board members, union leaders, and superintendents worried about the sheer amount of public criticism schools absorb can use this volume to move beyond today's sterile dialogue about governance. Some of what you find here may call into question how your district functions, but the exercises will offer positive ways to move forward. You'll also find in this book the data you need to respond to attacks on public education.

- Schools and colleges of education preparing potential administrators will find this a useful text. We were encouraged by the many adoptions of the first edition of this book for graduate courses and programs. Each of the authors of this volume is or has been affiliated with a major university, and we understand the importance of improving professional preparation. This *Superintendent's Fieldbook* can support preparation programs by buttressing theory with practical insights and hands-on experience.

- Government officials and philanthropists interested in improving pre- and in-service professional administrator development can use this book as a guide. Too frequently, government and private funders find themselves trying to improve professional development without knowing exactly what to do. This volume provides some insights.

- We would hope too that the *Fieldbook* can offer philanthropists and federal and state government leaders keener insights into the challenges of managing large-scale change at the local level. There are many ways to try to improve school performance. Based on our investigations at home and overseas, it seems that, although accountability and competition are

the tools of choice in the United States and England, the Chinese and French rely more on directives from on high, while Finns describe their approach as “gentle steering based on the principle of trust.” While the Finnish model cannot be imported wholesale to the United States, there seems to be little doubt it has produced better results and attracted very talented people into the profession.

Although developed, in brief, for current and aspiring school superintendents, this *Fieldbook* has much to offer a variety of school and public leaders and institutions of higher education.

OVERVIEW

So, what is essential in a school leader? What should a fieldbook addressed to leaders incorporate? Do you need to be able to teach everything from the alphabet to calculus, trigonometry, and quantum physics? What about the budget? Perhaps you need to know how to design the spreadsheet that develops it. How about technology? Surely, that’s important in a new century. Should you be double-checking building wiring schematics?

Of course, you shouldn’t be doing any of those things. There aren’t enough hours in the day, and you probably couldn’t do most of them anyway. You don’t have to actually do them, but you do have to see that each is done with a degree of excellence. Those tasks, however difficult, define the superintendency of the previous century; this *Fieldbook* helps you look ahead to the challenges of the new millennium.

The Superintendent’s Fieldbook is divided into 10 major parts. These parts are laid out as follows:

Part I. Orientation. This section is made up of an overview of how demands on school leaders are changing today and an introduction to what we call the *commonplaces* of leadership.

The overview of emerging demands touches on the changing political environment, choice, and competition in Pre-K–12 education and the challenges and promise of technology. It includes two thoughtful essays from national leaders on their decades of work shaping national policy for schools. It also features a provocative essay by a Roundtable superintendent on what changes in the larger world mean for school superintendents.

The *Fieldbook* itself is organized around seven “commonplaces” outlined in brief here and discussed more fully below. The “commonplaces” begin with the major elements that you need to worry about in terms of leading your organization: leadership, governance, learning and assessment, race and class in our schools, the imperative to develop school principals, collaboration with other agencies of government, and engaging your community and its citizens. The remaining parts of the *Fieldbook*

develop each of these “commonplaces” in turn. The final section asks what all of this means, responds to public education’s critics, and draws some lessons from education abroad.

Part II. *Leading Your Schools.* Here, you’ll learn how to think about your organization and how to distinguish between merely technical problems and adaptive challenges requiring deep-rooted institutional change. It’s in this part that we introduce you to one of the central framing ideas of this *Fieldbook*, the idea of *images of organization*. We have also added new material from leadership experts that rounds out our understanding of what organizational leadership means and what defines an effective leader in any organizational context.

Part III. *Coping With Governance Challenges.* Do the ins-and-outs and headaches of dealing with school boards and unions bedevil you? Here, you can find some answers. This part suggests that you need to understand not only how you think about your organization but also how your board and union members think about it as well. After all, you have your images; they have theirs. And in two highly personal essays, two Roundtable superintendents reflect on the importance of developing an entry-level plan when approaching a new position and on the challenges and rewards of leading a small district with a small staff.

Part IV. *Learning and Assessment.* With new demands for accountability and legislation such as No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and RTTT, it’s a brave new world out there for school leaders. This part helps you make sense out of accountability, value-added assessment, and performance-based compensation.

Part V. *Addressing Race and Class.* These are the great fault lines in American life. They can also be a “third rail” that school leaders touch at their peril. Part V provides some ideas about how to approach this third rail, how to begin to close the achievement gap, and how to think about what is often a difficult set of challenges: the combination of race, class, and poverty.

Part VI. *Developing Your Principals.* It’s a truism that schools are only as good as their principals. Here, you’ll find some exciting ideas about how to turn principals from building managers into leaders of learning. This section draws heavily on 10 years of recent research from the Wallace Foundation about developing effective school leaders.

Part VII. *Collaborating With Your Allies.* Think you can do it all by yourself? Think again. Who are your allies? What about the child protective services system? The employment security and public assistance offices? Medicaid and well-baby screening? This section touches on the many agencies concerned with child welfare in the United States and suggests some ways you can partner with them, particularly around early child care and learning.

Part VIII. *Engaging Your Community.* You don't want to be the leader who turns around and finds no one behind her. Nor do you want to be the poor guy scurrying to get in front of the parade. School leaders, like most public officials, once thought of public engagement as public relations. It was enough to persuade the public to go along with the established policy. That no longer works. Today's public insists on helping develop that policy. This part suggests a new concept of *public engagement*, one that encourages citizens to help create a shared vision of the future.

Part IX. *So, What Does All This Mean?* Here, the *Fieldbook* pulls it all together, linking the "commonplaces" to theories of organizational leadership to show how the combination can encourage certain kinds of behavior within your district. Are you curious about why your last district insisted on the party line while your new district promotes a lot of open discussion? Did your last district empower teachers and encourage a thousand flowers to bloom, while your new one specifies curriculum and assessment techniques in exquisite detail? The explanation probably lies in the different images that these districts hold of themselves. No matter what kind of school system you lead, or aspire to lead, you'll find it here. This section also helps you deal with the widespread criticism of American public education and adds relevant new research from the University of Chicago based on 30 years of examining school reform in the Windy City. One of the central findings of this research emphasizes the importance of social capital and community support.

Appendices. The final part is made up of appendices, primarily brief descriptions of the contributors to this volume and descriptions of the Danforth Forum and the National Superintendents Roundtable.

Within each of these major sections, you will find discussions of what these issues involve along with vignettes describing what they look like on the ground. The districts discussed cover densely populated urban areas on the East and West Coasts, sparsely populated local education agencies in the Southern and Plains states, and everything in between. You'll also find something else here in each major section: tools you can use in your district to get a better handle on these challenges. Finally, each part concludes with questions for reflective practice, a series of provocative questions designed to encourage you and your colleagues to think deeply about what you are doing.

HOW TO USE THE *FIELDBOOK*

If you're like most of us in education, you will be inclined to think you should start *The Superintendent's Fieldbook* on page one and continue until you reach the end. If you want to do that, by all means, be our guest, but that's not how most people use it. A fieldbook is more like a reference manual than a textbook. Our inspiration came from Peter Senge's pioneering

“fifth discipline” work and the fieldbooks associated with it. A fieldbook is something you should use as you need it. You will probably find that dipping in and out of the material as your needs change is the most profitable use of this *Fieldbook*.

Some morning, your challenge may be explaining student test results at a local community forum. You’re likely to want to look at Part IV: Learning and Assessment while ignoring the rest. The following week, you may find yourself with a major public relations crisis on your hands. Here, you’re likely to find Parts II: Leading Your Schools and VIII: Engaging Your Community more immediately useful.

You may find the *Fieldbook* useful as a guide to a series of seminars you might want to offer in your district. It benefits you little to possess a fine theoretical understanding of governance and organizational images if your board, administrators, or teachers don’t know what you’re talking about. The *Fieldbook* and the exercises incorporated into it can help you develop the leadership team with which you work.