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Leading the Newly Consolidated High School: Exciting Opportunity or Overwhelming Challenge?

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In the current economic times, school personnel are regularly challenged to reduce the costs of operating the nation's school systems. School district consolidations often are proposed as a mechanism to realize fiscal savings for local communities; indeed, the number of U.S. school districts has declined dramatically over the past 70 years, decreasing from 117,108 in 1939-40 to 13,809 in 2008-2009 (Snyder and Dillow 2010). Consolidations may occur to promote fiscal and administrative efficiency, or as a result of significant enrollment declines, diminished real estate valuations, and limited availability of highly qualified teachers (Howley, Johnson, and Petrie 2011; Zimmer, DeBoer, and Hirth 2009). Research primarily has focused on perceived benefits and disadvantages of consolidations and superintendents' political roles in negotiating through consolidation conversations within the impacted communities (Alsbury and Shaw 2005). An overlooked topic has been the high school principal's role in guiding the formation of a unified culture once the consolidation occurs—a responsibility that can be particularly challenging when two or more schools are consolidated to create a new high school. Time-honored traditions may be discarded and new rituals developed as students and faculty work to form a unified learning community.

The principal's responsibility to create a positive school culture is an important component during the first year of a school's formation, but, at the same time, accountability mandates of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB)¹ do not permit student achievement goals to be ignored during this transition period. It is essential for the principal to simultaneously commit to both the development of school culture and a focus on student learning during the school's formation. Yet, emphasizing both of these elements can be exceedingly difficult during this initial year of operation. What are the challenges that the principal faces during this transition phase? Is it possible to maintain a focus on student learning while also attending to the development of a shared organizational culture and addressing the structural elements of forming the new school?

This article describes a case study of one principal throughout the initial year of a newly consolidated high

school. It begins with a brief review of school consolidation research and research on leadership for learning, which served as a theoretical framework for this study. It then presents findings from the case study; in the discussion and implications sections, comparisons are made to prior studies and recommendations are provided for school districts and for policy.

Review of Literature

This study was informed by two bodies of literature, which address school district consolidation and leadership for learning. The first topic, school district consolidation, focuses on the historical, legislative, and fiscal influences on its reported benefits and challenges. The second topic examines the literature related to leadership for learning as a theoretical perspective from which to consider student academic growth.

School District Consolidation

The impetus for school district consolidations often is grounded in the desire to combine school systems to improve the quality of educational programming or to increase fiscal efficiency in educating children in rural communities. Topics addressed may include optimal school size, potential loss of community identity, political influences, power structures operating within the affected communities, and a desire for enhanced school experiences for students (Self 2001; St. Cyr Davis 2005). Consolidation can be facilitated by state legislators' efforts to reduce the number of school districts through mandatory or voluntary avenues. For example, in 1948 the state of Arkansas mandated dissolution of districts containing fewer than 350 students, which resulted in a reduction in the number of school districts from 2,451 in 1948 to 421 in 1949 (St. Cyr Davis 2005). However, heavy-handed efforts to force district consolidations can be met with vigorous resistance: Illinois enacted a law mandating school district reorganizations in 1985, but the legislature immediately repealed it after intense political backlash from constituents (Phillips and Day 2004). In an effort to encourage voluntary consolidations, several states provide fiscal incentives to school districts. Incentives may consist of a one-time financial stipend or supplemental payments for a fixed period of time to compensate for losses in state aid payments that would have been received if the districts had elected not to consolidate. The majority of consolidations across the United States have occurred through voluntary incentive programs (Grider and Versteegen 2000).

Proponents advance several arguments for district consolidations. One rationale promotes the infusion of sufficient student numbers to provide enriched curricular and extracurricular opportunities, particularly in high schools (Alsburly and Thomas 2008; Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel 2010). Opportunities may include expanding vocational/technical, foreign language, honors, and Advanced Placement (AP) courses; student choice may also be facilitated by increasing the number of course sections provided within the daily schedule. Students may benefit by having sufficient numbers to field competitive sports teams, music groups, and other cocurricular clubs. Proponents cite declining enrollments, declining property values that result in diminished school

district revenues, and the limited availability of highly qualified teachers as factors that can erode educational quality in small rural districts (Alsburly and Thomas 2008; Jimerson 2006; Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel 2010). Fleming and Hutton (1997) framed the consolidation debate in "either/or" terms: either saving money or improving students' opportunities for learning.

Community resistance to consolidation can emerge, with the loss of local control cited as the primary concern. Opposition may be more vigorous when consolidation encompasses larger geographical areas, such as countywide districts; it can create a "cultural, social and economic void in rural places" (Jimerson 2006, 11). Alsburly and Thomas (2008) described the potential loss of a distinct community identity, as well as a change in school culture or values, when a small district is absorbed into a district with a more pronounced community identity. Consolidation often "inhibits the spread of cultural knowledge and exacerbates a community's social and economic problems" (Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel 2010, 3). Opponents cite negative consequences for students, such as longer bus rides and larger class sizes (Alsburly and Thomas 2008; Zimmer, DeBoer, and Hirth 2009). Other concerns relate to perceived reduction in community representation on the board of education (Alsburly and Thomas 2008), and parent participation (Howley, Johnson, and Petrie 2011; Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel 2010). A school closure may be viewed as the death of civic life within the community, although Nitta et al. (2010, 3) could find "no causal argument" suggesting that loss of the school was directly responsible for the disintegration of the local community.

Despite potential local resistance to district consolidations, school district superintendent support for consolidations has been documented. Alsburly and Thomas (2008) cited findings from a national superintendent survey indicating that 86% of respondents favored school district consolidation. Research suggests that school district leaders must fulfill a management function when communities are considering consolidation and once the consolidation decision has been reached (Alsburly and Thomas, 2008; Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel 2010; Self 2001; Strang 1987), including the responsibilities related to enrollment coordination, facilities, staffing, financial decisions, and transportation (Zimmer, DeBoer, and Hearsh 2009). School consolidations also can present significant challenges for school principals, who arguably are at the front line of this debate, as parents and community members passionately argue the merits and disadvantages of this issue. The principal hired to lead a newly consolidated school must address the challenges of creating a new sense of identity for students and staff, attending to the managerial and structural demands of forming the new organization, and also maintaining a consistent focus on student learning.

Leadership for Learning

The leadership for learning framework can be an effective mechanism to view the high school principal's essential leadership role in facilitating a school consolidation through a focus on student, faculty, and organizational learning. Leadership for learning, according to Knapp et al. (2003),

establishes five areas that effective leaders address: (1) establishing a focus on learning; (2) building professional communities that take learning seriously; (3) engaging external environments that matter for learning; (4) acting strategically and collaboratively along pathways of activity aimed at different aspects of student, professional, and system learning; and (5) creating coherence. The high school principalship is becoming increasingly complex (Grubb and Flessa 2006), and this position can be even more challenging with the additional component of leading a newly consolidated school. As a lever of change, the principal must be strategic in obtaining the commitment of faculty and students to the learning process (Mulford and Silins 2003).

Researchers have cited the importance of the principal's role in facilitating productive learning cultures. Although the principal's effect on student learning is indirect, research has confirmed that one fourth of the variance on student achievement is related to the principal's influence (Leithwood et al. 2004). One mechanism leaders can employ to promote learning is by focusing the entire system on quality learning for all students (Knapp et al. 2006). Visiting classrooms regularly and publicly recognizing teachers for effective teaching and learning practices can encourage teachers' efforts to improve student performance (Mezzacappa et al. 2008). Copland and Boatright (2006) noted the importance of personalized strategies and leadership distribution as helpful in promoting student achievement. Additionally, Robinson, Lloyd, and Rowe (2008) concluded that teacher learning and ultimately student success improved when principals exerted pedagogical knowledge on practices or policies related to student achievement.

Researchers cite the importance of the principal's role in promoting teacher learning and professional growth. This influence began to be recognized through the process used to clarify the work of teaching and learning, which led to devoting more attention to instructional issues that addressed student learning and evidence of program effectiveness (Hallinger and Heck 2010; Knapp et al. 2006). This influence has been described as the strengthening of communities of practice (DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker 2008; Louis et al. 2010). The mechanisms by which school leaders shape school conditions perhaps can be facilitated through the establishment of a shared or distributed leadership environment (Hallinger and Heck 2010; Louis et al. 2010; Murphy et al. 2009).

Research Questions and Methodology

Informed by the literature review, this case study investigated how a high school principal addressed student learning in a newly consolidated school. Two research questions were explored: (1) How does the principal maintain a focus on student learning during the first year of a district consolidation? (2) What factors facilitate or inhibit the principal's effectiveness in maintaining a focus on learning during the first year of a district consolidation?

This research involved a case study of one high school in the Midwest, with a focus on the leadership behaviors of the school principal throughout the first year of the school

consolidation. Data collection included 10 interviews of the principal throughout the academic year, each ranging from 40 to 60 minutes. Initial interview questions were informed by Knapp et al.'s (2003) leading for learning framework, and subsequent interviews expanded upon emerging themes. Interviews also were conducted of members of the building leadership team, which consisted of two teachers and the assistant principal. Each team member was interviewed twice, with each interview lasting approximately one hour. Observations were conducted throughout the academic year of team meetings, faculty meetings, and school improvement activities. Document analysis was conducted of minutes of the board of education meetings and materials developed by the district consolidation committee that had facilitated the two districts' consolidation conversations.

The constant comparative method was used for data analysis with initial codes developed from the leadership for learning framework and common themes identified. Emic data were gathered to gain an "insider's perspective" of the principal, and etic data provided an "outsider's view" from the perspective of the teachers and other administrators (Merriam 2002, 6-7). NVivo 8 software was used for data coding, sorting, and assistance with the identification of themes.

Description of Case

Lakeside Community School District is situated in a rural area of a Midwestern state.² With approximately 1,500 students, it was formed when Gotham City School District and Metropolis School District voluntarily consolidated. Gotham City and its high school boasted a long tradition of educational pride and expectations of academic excellence while the Metropolis community was not known for its emphasis on academic excellence. State achievement test scores for Gotham City High School were stable over the past decade while those for Metropolis High School gradually increased. The most recent year's test data were similar for both schools, with 60% of students meeting or exceeding state standards in reading and mathematics, and 50% meeting or exceeding standards in writing. For science, 60% of Gotham City High School students met or exceeded standards compared to 50% of Metropolis High School students. However, Gotham City High School students did not meet federal NCLB adequate yearly progress (AYP) standards in recent years, while Metropolis High School students continually met them. The newly consolidated district contains five schools--three elementary schools, one middle school, one high school--and approximately 400 students are enrolled in the newly formed Lakeside High School. Like schools in many rural communities, there is little racial/ethnic diversity in the student body: 97% are white. Approximately one fourth of the students qualify for free or reduced-price lunches.

Megan Wayne, the newly appointed principal, retained her administrative appointment in the same building that now contains Lakeside High School, having served the past four years as Gotham City High School principal. A former English teacher, she also had served as principal in two other school districts. She holds a master's degree in educational

administration from a local college. Lakeside High School employs 48 faculty and staff members, of which 70% worked at Gotham City High School and 30% at Metropolis High School. Only one new employee was hired after the consolidation, Chase Grayson, who was appointed assistant principal to provide administrative support to Ms. Wayne.

The Lakeside Community School District superintendent, who previously was the Gotham City superintendent and provided administrative oversight to the district consolidation, made a significant commitment to erase all vestiges of the former Gotham City High School. Lakeside High School campus buildings were repainted in the new high school colors so that students would begin to assimilate into one combined student body.

Findings

This section presents findings related to the research questions, the first involving the principal's behaviors and activities that addressed student learning issues, and the second, which examined factors that facilitated and restricted her ability to focus on student learning.

Focusing on Student Learning

Throughout interviews, Principal Megan Wayne voiced the importance of maintaining a consistent focus on student learning, and she identified improving student learning opportunities within the school as a personal goal. These were apparent with the addition of AP Calculus, AP Chemistry, dual-credit English, and dual-credit welding courses to the curriculum in the spring prior to the consolidation.

When the school opened in late August, the need to develop a unified school culture became apparent to Megan. She explained that students and parents were apprehensive, and students were sufficiently concerned that they asked her if they would be disciplined for wearing memorabilia from either of the two former high schools. Assistant Principal Chase Grayson described the initial tension:

A girl said when you walked into a class you saw the barrier—the physical barrier—because the Metropolis kids sat on this side of the room and the Gotham City kids sat on this side of the classroom. It was over a month before they were able to sit together.

Megan was concerned about the potential for conflict between students and personnel from the two former districts. Forming a new integrated culture was essential, as she explained:

The Metropolis teachers felt that they were moving into the Gotham City teachers' territory... We spent a lot of time repainting and making this as new for everybody as we could so, psychologically, when people were walking into the building, it was a new school. It wasn't just Gotham City turned into Lakeside High School.

Relatively little effort had been expended on preparing students or faculty for the transition. Consolidation conversations within the communities had centered on the financial states of the two dissolved districts, with

little attention to enhancing the curriculum, expanding cocurricular activities, or anticipating concerns about student needs during the transition period. Megan's administrative behavior and communication focused on management and operational issues—particularly, unexpected matters that arose. She created a principal's cabinet consisting of 16 students, four from each grade level who represented a cross-section of students from different social groups. This cabinet met monthly so that Megan could obtain candid feedback from students concerning what was working and what was not. Although she worked to incorporate their suggestions, she did not regularly share student feedback with faculty.

Observations of faculty meetings and school improvement meetings and teacher interviews confirmed that managerial issues consumed Megan's administrative work life during the first several months of the school year, and teaching and learning issues often were pushed aside. Megan regularly included topics related to curriculum and student academic performance on the building leadership team and faculty meeting agendas, but discussions digressed into concerns about student discipline, student apathy, and challenges presented by the district's new student management software. Although she was an experienced principal, Megan explained that student issues hampered her ability to operate as a learning leader. She reported "spending a great deal of time on discipline issues throughout the day," even though the new assistant principal was responsible for student discipline. "I need to be visible more," she asserted, aware that she was being pulled away from her instructional leadership duties to resolve some of the new school's organizational concerns. She cited her duty to supervise and evaluate 48 faculty and staff members, expressing her apprehension that she would have insufficient time for classroom observations.

Working with the building leadership team to develop the Lakeside school improvement plan, Megan and the faculty had identified goals to reduce student apathy; improve students' reading comprehension; and maintain a safe school environment. The third goal was operationalized by teachers supervising the hallways during between-class passing periods. Megan explained, "Of course, those were the teachers' goals and not necessarily my personal goals, which is as it should be." Megan asked teachers to work toward these goals during their departmental meetings, assuming that they would take responsibility for them.

During the first semester, the district administrative team did not schedule districtwide curriculum meetings, perhaps because they—like Megan—were consumed with creating the district organizational structure, policies, and procedures. After waiting for specific direction from district administrators, Megan decided not to engage the high school faculty in reviewing the curriculum. This lack of curriculum leadership was problematic because the two districts had different curricula in place. Now, within their departmental structures, Lakeside High School teachers potentially were functioning with unaligned curricula, differing instructional methods, and divergent grading methods. Megan stated that she had assumed a distributed leadership stance by "allowing the departments to work together," but the teachers

interviewed interpreted this approach as providing very little administrative support or guidance and, instead, “pushing off” her work onto them. Some teachers even described her approach as “avoidance,” or a deliberate strategy to avoid conflicts.

Megan repeatedly asserted the importance of providing opportunities for teachers to collaborate so that they could develop collegial relationships while stating that she did not have time to personally lead these activities. Because the district administration also did not focus on curricular issues, teachers were left to develop curriculum and examine data related to student learning. As a result, departmental meetings often lacked a specific instructional focus, and instead centered on managerial tasks. According to Megan, the English and mathematics departments were the only departments that focused on curriculum, instruction, and student learning during the first semester. Whitney, a mathematics teacher, explained that her departmental faculty initially waited for administrative direction but finally became proactive when it was apparent that district and building administrators were not providing instructional leadership. The math teachers worked together to review and align their curriculum, and to incorporate the AP Calculus course into their course offerings.

Megan struggled with deciding whether she should be more directive in her leadership approach. She attended departmental meetings only sporadically, and two building leadership team members reported that she cancelled many faculty meetings and only occasionally attended their meetings. Megan asserted that “time limitations” and being “bogged down with discipline” hindered her full participation. Entering the final six weeks of the academic year, Megan decided to take a more active leadership role, regularly attending departmental and building leadership team meetings and calling upon the latter to begin to use and analyze student learning data. She decided that the current team, which was comprised entirely of volunteers, was ineffective in addressing pressing school issues. She asked Abigail, whom she perceived as an emerging teacher leader within the school, to assist her with identifying key individuals to serve on a restructured team. After handpicking and appointing the new building leadership team members, Megan seized upon the district’s recently identified mandate to implement Response to Intervention (RtI) as an opportunity to refocus her efforts as learning leader. She dedicated the year’s two remaining school improvement days to RtI training and called upon team members to assist with implementing RtI components. Megan personally made site visits to area schools that had successfully implemented RtI and called upon colleagues within her professional network to locate individuals with expertise in the program. Finally, she took pains to praise the efforts of all faculty members when they demonstrated notable progress on implementation. Abigail explained the positive effects of Megan’s renewed emphasis on leadership:

We pushed through it...made teachers work at it, and they didn’t just sit around and do nothing. I think we are all really pushing in that right direction. Bouncing

ideas off her [Megan] has been good. I think that has really helped me.

Clearly, building leadership team members saw the relationship between these new leadership practices and their results in developing a building-wide focus and mission centered on student learning. The team felt re-engaged and re-energized around a vision for student learning that was well planned and organized with clear vision, mission, and goals. However, observational data did not confirm similar enthusiasm from other teachers because they were not involved in building-wide conversations about teaching and learning issues. Even while Megan began to focus on learning, she maintained a mindset to “survive the year.” Looking back on her first year leading the consolidated school she observed, “Consolidation is good for kids but not for administrators.”

Factors that Facilitated or Hindered a Focus on Learning

Also investigated were elements that promoted Megan’s ability to focus on student learning, as well as those factors that restricted her instructional leadership effectiveness. Analysis of data disclosed several themes related to these elements. Three themes were identified that helped facilitate a focus on learning: distributed leadership practices, shared conversations and open dialogue, and establishment of a unified school culture. Four themes were identified that hindered the principal’s ability to focus on student learning: school governance issues and concerns about micromanagement; lack of a shared vision of learning; difficulties managing pockets resistance within the faculty; and challenges of establishing a new school culture, traditions, and practices. These themes are discussed in this section.

Distributed leadership. Megan intended to place decision-making authority in the hands of teachers, and she initially worked to establish a culture of shared leadership within the school. She hoped the board of education trusted that she and the faculty had the collective knowledge and competency to make good decisions in accomplishing the district goals. Megan hoped the board viewed this process as, “We hired you as principal. Now go do your thing and report back to us about how things are going.” She initially structured the building leadership team to include volunteer representation from each department. Interviews confirmed that the teachers had assumed decision-making authority in their previous schools, and they expected to maintain this influence in the consolidated school. As the end of the school year approached, Megan began to rely more heavily on the reconstituted building leadership team, placing them directly in front of the faculty so that school improvement processes could be viewed as colleagues talking with colleagues—what she described as a “professional learning community.” All participants used the terminology, “distributed leadership,” when describing Megan’s actions to involve faculty in leadership roles, although they described these leadership functions in various ways. The principal believed the creation of these roles was necessary to establish an atmosphere of collaboration in the building. As the study concluded, evidence of distributed practice had begun to emerge.

Megan created two teacher teams to complement the work of the building leadership team—a school improvement team and a student assistance team—so that more teachers could have decision-making authority on issues related to student academic progress. She used the remaining school improvement days to implement a professional learning community model (DuFour et al. 2008), partnering teachers who were effective in implementing RtI best practices with those who were developing their skills. Whitney, a math teacher, praised these activities: “Everyone commented that we needed this, but it was directed by a teacher. It was teacher led.” Chase, the assistant principal, noted their success:

All of these groups are the most effectively run things that I have ever been around. Ms. Wayne did a very smart thing. She took everyone that was a PIA [pain in the (expletive deleted)] and threw them on the same team and said, “Okay, figure it out.”

Abigail confirmed the development of the teachers’ leadership capacity:

Once we realized that leadership is a process, team building is a process, and things don’t happen overnight...we began to be far more successful. By the end of the year, we were able to collaborate better with one another.

Shared conversation and open dialogue. When the Lakeside High School faculty initially came together in August, Megan’s vision for the new school was not fully developed. Observations of the first faculty meeting indicated that building goals were unclear, faculty from the two former high schools were not yet unified as a cohesive group, and limited opportunities were provided for whole-faculty dialogue. Several months into the year, Megan concluded that the school’s forward momentum had stalled. There was informal discussion among teachers about structural and policy issues within the building, but this dialogue was not translated into implementation. During interviews, Megan mentioned with a growing sense of urgency that the faculty’s absence of action had to change. She began to recognize the importance of engaging the faculty in critical conversations to develop a shared understanding of the building vision, mission, and goals.

Several dissenters began to emerge within the faculty, whom Megan characterized as “extremely vocal in their complaints.” Megan consulted with colleagues from other schools that had been involved in school consolidations; and, heeding their advice, she had cancelled regularly scheduled faculty meetings. She came to the realization that this decision was ill- advised because the dissenters were unable to have their voices heard. Megan believed that frustration with their inability to participate in school decision-making processes created increasing levels of anxiety, lack of trust in the administration, growing complaints about working conditions, and the potential for sabotage.

Recognizing the importance of building-wide dialogue, Megan began to create additional opportunities for faculty input and involvement. She wanted teachers to feel that changes were being done “with” them and not “to” them.

She appointed some dissenters to the leadership and school improvement teams, observing that, “Now they have to come up with a solution and be part of the solution instead of part of the problem.” Chase reinforced the need for “valued and beneficial open conversation,” and noted that, once new communication channels were in place, teachers became more collaborative and collegial. The school improvement team quickly developed a school improvement plan. Chase observed, “As far as SIP [the school improvement plan], we’ve got plans now. All of these things that should have been in place since day one.”

As the year concluded, Megan acknowledged that creating opportunities for shared conversations and open dialogue were essential to developing a student learning focus. She remarked:

I think we’ve made more strides school improvement-wise in the last six weeks than in the rest of the year...It’s working like magic so far. It might turn around and bite me, but we’ve made a lot of progress.

Creating a positive, unified school culture. Observations and interviews indicated that students took the lead in working to establish a unified learning community. Megan noted that, although some teachers and community members were still unsupportive of the consolidation, the vast majority of students accepted the reality of the consolidation, saying “Okay, let’s move on. This is the world we have now. Let’s make it the best world we can.” Whitney agreed:

The kids really came together. They were hanging out anyway with kids from the opposite district, and now they are dating each other, playing ball together, and they’re working together.

Megan and Chase used the cohesiveness of the student body as an opportunity for the faculty to learn from the students’ example. Noting that “the teachers have been watching the kids come together,” Megan hoped that the “us and them” mentality for the teachers from the two former schools would move to “we,” a unified faculty.

Megan observed that initially teachers were divided into two camps, “pointing fingers” with regard to inadequate student performance based upon which high school they worked at prior to the consolidation. In her first interview, Megan was unaware that she had not yet mentally transitioned to a unified school culture herself, as she voiced the need to be “fair in how we address things between the two common faculties.” As teachers were given opportunities to interact and to explore teaching and learning issues through building leadership team meetings and school improvement days, they began to analyze student data, without thought as to whether the students were originally from Gotham City or Metropolis. Megan also believed that the leadership team helped to “establish that atmosphere of, hopefully, collaboration and less isolation” that she believed was typical of larger comprehensive high schools.

With Megan’s support, the building leadership team gave a presentation to the school board in which they requested early-out work sessions on the first and third Friday afternoons of the month during the upcoming academic year which

would be used for curriculum conversations, curriculum audits, and examination of college readiness benchmarks. Megan was thrilled that the board approved their proposal because the sessions represented an opportunity for the faculty to continue to deepen their collaborative relationships and to focus on student learning.

School governance and school board micromanagement. The most significant concern, voiced in 15 of the 16 interviews, related to perceptions by the principal and teachers that they were closely monitored by the board of education, and therefore were given very little decision-making authority. The school board included members from the two closed school districts; hence, just as the consolidated high school faculty was learning to work collaboratively, members of the new school board also were learning to function as a cohesive group. Megan believed that board members enjoyed their authority, stating:

They are in control of what they can table and what they can pass and what they can disapprove....Every step, every bit of it is micromanaged.

Some teachers believed that a rigid organizational hierarchy characterized the new district. Abigail explained:

We have a board who likes to micromanage. We then hire a superintendent who likes to micromanage. We get down into it, down farther, and people are frustrated with the micromanaging.

The faculty was used to functioning under the policies and practices of their respective now-dissolved school boards, which were less restrictive, and assumed that the new board's procedures would align with them. Board members, administrators, and teachers were experiencing the formation of a new organizational culture. Uncertainty existed about the chain of command and who was empowered with what decision-making authority. Megan believed that, as a result of board politics, board members were restricting the superintendent's leadership influence, which had an unintended consequence of hindering her authority to serve as the high school's learning leader. Concluding that her superintendent had "been cut off at the knees this year also by the board directing and not letting him do his job," Megan was not certain that she had the support of her board and superintendent. Consequently, she reacted by deferring decisions to the superintendent, which created role confusion and uncertainty for teachers. Whitney explained:

Your chain of command as teacher is to go to your principal and not deal directly with the superintendent unless it is very, very severe. That has not happened here. If I have to go get something, I have to go to him [the superintendent]. Every time something changes, it's through him. So, I don't really get what her purpose is.

Megan believed that the board's oversight created an "unpredictable" environment, in which high school administrators and teachers felt that their decisions were being "second-guessed" by board members. Abigail also felt that high school administrators' "hands are tied," asserting that they should have the authority to make decisions without

the school board implementing a different course of action. Abigail lamented, "After a while you decide why waste your time. You're just spinning circles wasting time." Chase also observed that teachers were beginning to "expect knee-jerk reactions" from the board.

Chase initially believed that micromanagement was not an issue. However, he later described a situation in which the school board decided to involve the local police in investigating a student fight without his knowledge, overriding his authority as the school disciplinarian. Expressing his surprise when the police "just showed up one morning," Chase explained:

You know, the thing with the police was a little bit ridiculous. It didn't solve anything, cost a lot of money...It really left a bad taste in some people's mouths.

Difficulty creating a shared vision of learning. Significant efforts had gone into the research, planning, development, and implementation of the school district consolidation, but district officials spent most of their energy on addressing the structural elements of the consolidation rather than on teaching and learning needs. Megan said the intricacies of the consolidation meant that important conversations about the district vision for student learning were pushed aside. It was not until December of the implementation year that the board began to engage in strategic planning, including development of its mission, vision, and goals. No participants interviewed had read or heard an articulated vision for the district. Abigail, who was enrolled in a graduate program to attain her principal' licensure, reported that the superintendent could not produce a copy of the district vision when she asked for one to use for a course assignment.

Megan stated that she had attempted to develop a vision of learning for her building, but she found it difficult to create one in the absence of a district vision. The cancellation of high school faculty meetings was viewed as problematic by the teachers because faculty were not provided opportunities to dialogue and to reach shared understandings about effective classroom practices; neither were they receiving information from the administration. Teachers reported learning about important building-level issues from students, who seemed to be much more "in-the-know." Whitney asserted: "We just need to keep working on our communication," arguing that regular faculty meetings were sorely needed. Abigail expressed frustration with the lack of meetings: "It's the first year of consolidation, half your staff is new, and we don't have anything to talk about?" Megan reluctantly agreed that communication was a concern and reported that she was uncertain about what she was permitted to share with her faculty because of her perceived tenuous relationship with the superintendent and school board.

During a faculty meeting in March, it was observed that a critical issue was placed at the end of the agenda which had the effect of limiting the time for faculty discussion on an important topic. Because opportunities for faculty dialogue were minimal, discussions in the few faculty meetings that were held often revolved around managerial and organizational issues that needed urgent attention, with little

time remaining to discuss student learning. Megan reported having numerous “individual conversations” with teachers on an informal basis involving curriculum concerns. However, building leadership team members reported that these one-on-one talks did little to promote a shared learning culture throughout the building. Explaining that conversations often were prompted by the faculty members themselves, Whitney stated, “You know we have to go to her if there is an issue.” Leadership team members believed that, as the school’s learning leader, it was Megan’s responsibility to initiate faculty-wide conversations about student learning, and they expressed frustration that this was not occurring on a regular basis.

Managing pockets of resistance. Megan and Chase both stated that many teachers and community members who had opposed the district consolidation incorrectly believed that the option existed to dissolve the consolidation and return to their prior districts after the first year. The administrative team observed that some individuals were overtly resisting their efforts to bring faculty and students into a cohesive group. The building leadership team members stated that Megan should become more authoritative by addressing those who vocally challenged proposed school reforms and asserting her role as the building leader. Chase observed, “I think she’s not as forceful as she could be.” Megan was hesitant to take control of building-level decisions, but she did not realize that this hesitancy greatly affected the teachers’ commitment to focus on what was expected of students. All individuals interviewed agreed that the building leaders were primarily responsible for anticipating resistance to change and communicating expectations for personnel performance.

One consequence of teachers’ resistance was that some teachers began to isolate themselves from their colleagues. Chase believed this isolation was a trust issue: “I don’t know that people really trust each other like they should in this building.” He noted that the lack of collaboration had been a problem throughout the year, which hindered the development of trust across the faculty and administration, stating:

The majority of teachers in this building have not talked with the other teachers in their department. You know—those from the opposite school district that joined with us.

Looking back, Megan reflected on the fact that the building and district had not scheduled any team-building activities at the beginning of the academic year, which could have been purposefully designed to begin to break down barriers that existed between the two teacher groups. She explained:

In terms of bringing people together to deal with their anxiety and strengths and inadequacies—throwing everybody in a pot or a building together—that was definitely something I should have worked through.

Establishing a new school culture, traditions, and practices. The importance of a positive school culture was a consistent theme throughout all interviewees’ descriptions of their work in their new high school. A complicating factor for

Megan was the fact that the new Lakeside High School was situated in the same facility and campus as the dissolved Gotham City High School, and 70% of the faculty were former Gotham City teachers. Megan said that Metropolis teachers felt they were moving “into Gotham City teachers’ territory.” This undercurrent was apparent throughout the year when decisions were reached about school policies and procedures. Because the majority were former Gotham City School District employees, as was Megan, many of their policies and procedures became Lakeside High School policies by default. As the school year progressed, Megan observed that the former Metropolis High School teachers became increasingly adamant that the few remaining policies should be decided by adopting “the Metropolis way...no matter what.” Megan continually worked behind the scenes to smooth things out between two teacher groups, in a dialogue she sometimes described as “us versus them.”

Another concern was the assimilation of students and faculty into the new high school culture. Abigail and Chase, in their first interviews, both reported that many teachers’ attitudes toward their students who were from the “other” district were perceived as negative and condescending. Even though it appeared that the students had accepted the school consolidation, they still maintained some allegiance to their former schools. Chase observed:

You see a kid taking their senior pictures in a football jersey from GCHS, and a football jersey from Lakeside High School, and from Metropolis. There’s just a difference in it, and it made me sad. But is just...this feeling like they don’t want to let go.

Although the two high school administrators understood the issues in facilitating a school consolidation, they also were concerned that they would be perceived as taking sides with the Gotham City or Metropolis camps, as opposed to expending their energies on forging a new identity.

Compounding the development of a shared teaching and learning culture, teachers from the two closed schools were perceived to have had differing expectations for academic performance. Gotham City was known to be “the elitist district,” explained Megan, with higher academic standards and higher proportions of students excelling in honors courses. The Gotham City High School grading scale required a minimum average of 94% to earn a grade of A, which was lower than the Metropolis scale. In March, when the Lakeside High School grading policy proposed 90% would be required for an A, many teachers and parents perceived this as reducing academic standards. This proposal resulted in a contentious school board meeting, with numerous parents expressing opposition to the new grading policy.

The academic differences of the two closed schools became painfully apparent at the end of the year, when valedictorians and salutatorians were to be named. Due to the school’s recent consolidation, the principals reached the decision to share the academic honors, selecting co-valedictorians and co-salutatorians from each closed high school. Megan experienced an ethical dilemma, because the two top Gotham City students were “not even in the top few” of the overall Lakeside High School senior class. Observing that there was

“a complete and total difference” in academic performance of students from the two former high schools, Megan struggled with developing a building-wide culture in which all teachers had consistent beliefs and expectations for student learning.

Discussion

This case study reinforces findings from prior studies concluding that school leaders must attend to substantial managerial duties when engaged in a district consolidation to ensure that the new organization functions effectively (Alsbury 2008; Nitta, Holley, and Wrobel 2010; Self 2001). Researchers have highlighted the principal’s important role as learning leader and documented the increasing complexity of this position (Hallinger and Heck, 2010; Knapp et al. 2006; Louis et al. 2010; Grubb and Flessa, 2006). Important duties of the principal during the implementation year include addressing the school’s structure; developing trusting, collegial relationships among stakeholders (e.g., students, teachers, staff, parents) who are brought together from the closed schools; and working to create a unified organizational culture while honoring vestiges of the dissolved schools. These issues must be successfully negotiated with all relevant parties while the principal simultaneously is attempting to maintain a focus on student learning, including developing a shared vision of student academic performance, creating shared expectations for teaching and learning, reviewing the curriculum, developing uniform grading policies, and guiding the faculty in developing common assessments. In today’s accountability era, the principal cannot ignore student achievement issues, even when other urgent issues compete for attention.

This study was informed by the leadership for learning framework of Knapp et al. (2003), which is based on five action points that learning-focused leaders address, including establishing a focus on learning; building professional communities; engaging external environments; acting strategically and collaboratively along pathways of activity aimed at different aspects of student, professional, and system learning; and creating coherence. As was observed in this study, the principal experienced numerous hurdles as she attempted to function as Lakeside High School’s learning leader. In this section, we discuss selected findings that influenced her effectiveness during the school’s first year of operation. These include the following themes: addressing board micromanagement and school governance concerns, creating opportunities for open dialogue, and creating a unified school culture.

Addressing Board Micromanagement and School Governance Concerns

The governance process can create procedures that allow stakeholders to gather and influence information, process complex information, make good decisions, and act on those decisions (DuFour et al. 2010; Knapp et al. 2003). Stakeholders must be allowed to engage in the governance process, which requires trust on the part of the principal, teachers, district administrators, and school board. A notable challenge in this case was teachers’ lack of trust in the school board because they experienced repeated board

interference in school affairs, which resulted in marginalized decision-making practices at the district and building levels. As Louis et al. (2010, 41) noted, “It matters a great deal whether participants in an organization trust the decision-making capacity of the organization’s leaders.” Participants viewed board micromanagement as an intrusion into their areas of responsibility, noting that reactionary policies were adopted and that board members often were actively and inappropriately engaged in implementing policies. Policy implementation is a function of the school district and building administration rather than of the board (Land 2002).

Distributed leadership has been advocated (Louis et al. 2010; Spillane, Halverson, and Diamond 2001) as a mechanism to involve faculty in school decision making, shared leadership responsibilities, and building of faculty skills and capacity as organizational leaders. Because the principal was consumed with the managerial/structural demands inherent in forming the new school, she initially did not engage others in leadership roles. Although an assistant principal had been hired, she was unaccustomed to sharing administrative duties with another colleague and did not fully engage her building leadership team. The ability to empower teachers around formal leadership roles has been found to have a significant association with improved professional learning in collaborative settings, individual teacher learning, and collective leadership (Leithwood and Mascall 2008). Principals can develop a shared culture by extending “significant decisional influence to others” (Louis et al. 2010, 35), motivating teachers, and providing roles for teacher leaders to provide instructional support to their colleagues.

Importance of Creating Opportunities for Open Dialogue

The building leader must consistently communicate the centrality of student learning throughout the organization, an obligation that Louis et al. (2010) described as a core leadership practice. Knapp et al. (2003, 21) also noted that “leaders tell and show others repeatedly that learning and particular aspects or areas of student learning are the shared mission of students, teachers, administrators, and the community.” The degree to which the principal effectively communicates either can build and maintain trust or can create roadblocks and distrust for followers. Some faculty members perceived that the principal was selectively providing information to them, primarily in private conversations with individual teachers. Because faculty meetings often were cancelled, and the principal routinely missed critical meetings, limited opportunities were being provided for the faculty to engage in open dialogue and group problem solving. One consequence of this inadequate communication was a growing chorus of faculty dissenters who began to vocally question the principal’s leadership practices.

As the school year wound down, the principal began to involve key faculty members on the building leadership team and invite faculty to take key roles with professional development. However, these efforts to more fully engage the faculty in dialogue were perceived as “too little, too late.”

Creating a Unified School Culture

Although the conception of culture is unique to each local context, culture generally has been defined as the beliefs, values, assumptions, and institutional norms that guide how people work in an organization (Schein 2004). McGuire et al. (2009, 6) described the goal of culture change as work “to purposefully and actively build capability for new ways of working.” Shaping the building’s culture must be intentional as culture begins to be communicated by what people value. Establishing a positive culture in a newly consolidated school is a challenging process because it requires integrating faculty and students from two or more dissolved school organizations who bring their ingrained institutional norms and assumptions with them as they collectively develop a new organizational culture. In this case, the process of developing the Lakeside High School culture was complicated by the fact that the principal and 70% of the faculty had worked together in one of the closed schools, leaving the remaining 30% of the faculty feeling as if they were being simply absorbed into the dominant belief systems and practices of their colleagues. Additionally, academic expectations varied within the two closed schools, creating conflicting academic expectations among the teachers and parents when the consolidated school was formed. Unfortunately, the principal did not give sufficient thought to the importance of unifying the faculty and staff into a cohesive group.

Implications

This study provided several insights into the impact of a school district consolidation on a high school principal’s ability focus on learning. These revolve around the role of school boards in newly consolidated school districts, communication during the initial year of consolidation, and principal effectiveness.

As was noted previously, the school board in a newly consolidated school district plays a critical role in the development of the governance structure and philosophy for enacting and implementing district policy. The school board must develop a vision for the new district based on the shared beliefs and core values of internal and external stakeholders. At the same time, school board members must be mindful of their responsibility to enact policies while that of the superintendent, central office administrators, and principals is to implement them. Clear lines of authority must be established and honored so that school leaders feel that their decisions are being supported, particularly during a time of transition. As the lead administrator, the superintendent can help to educate the new board members on their roles and responsibilities. If the board becomes involved in the day-to-day operations of schools and the district, administrators may feel that their decision-making authority is being questioned while faculty and students may perceive that the board is losing confidence in the administrative team.

The second implication relates to the challenges that can occur when sustained communication does not occur during the initial year of consolidation. The principal must ensure that numerous, sustained opportunities for dialogue and communication are provided to all stakeholders,

including faculty, staff, students, and parents. Although communication may emanate from the school administration, two-way communication channels also should be developed so that faculty, students, and stakeholders can voice concerns, recommend solutions, and engage in continued conversations as the new organization takes shape. Principals must build collective capacity around feedback loops. This feedback must be balanced and inclusive of areas of strength and success as well as opportunities for change. If the newly combined faculty is not provided with opportunities to develop relationships, conflicts may occur between faculty groups from the dissolved schools, as well as among students, because they have not developed a shared understanding of their functions and practices within the new school.

Third, as challenging as it may be, the principal must use effective leadership practices to focus on student learning from the onset of the school’s formation. Current demands for accountability require a continued focus on student achievement, such that school administrators and teachers cannot ignore curriculum, instruction, and assessment practices. Providing time for collaboration is necessary so the faculty and administration can form a cohesive group, engage in curriculum conversations, and address student learning needs. The challenging nature of continuous improvement requires the principal to lead strategically, identifying issues to address, and distributing leadership responsibilities across faculty members who have the capacity and skills to assist with these important tasks (Elmore 2002). Given the expanded responsibilities to develop the culture, norms, policies, and procedures for the newly consolidated school, the principal can easily become overwhelmed, and therefore may overlook the responsibility of serving as the school’s learning leader.

Conclusion

Clearly, a principal who is charged with leading the consolidation of two high schools into one restructured school is faced with many complex, competing responsibilities. As was discovered in this case, even when an experienced principal is at the helm of the newly reconfigured school, it can be quite challenging to integrate two distinct groups of students and teachers into one unified organization. As Megan, the Lakeside High School principal, was designing the new school structure, she simultaneously was negotiating the political realities of functioning within the new district organization—to understand her roles, responsibilities, and working relationships with her district administrators, the new school board, and faculty. Her time was consumed with the structural and managerial elements of forming the new school in its initial year of existence: creating policies, rules, and procedures, and managing student discipline issues. Due to her intense focus on these elements, it was difficult for her attend to other factors that also were vital to the school’s formation, such as engaging teachers in team-building activities to bring them together into a cohesive group, maintaining ongoing communication and opportunities for faculty dialogue, developing a shared vision of student learning with faculty and students, attending to the formation of a positive school culture, and leading

faculty conversations about teaching and learning. Reflecting on her performance as the school year concluded, Megan lamented that she had been narrowly focused on operating in “survival mode” throughout the academic term and had not embraced her critical role as learning leader. As the academic year was winding down, she began to refocus on teaching and learning, as well as to involve members of the building leadership team in assuming some curriculum leadership responsibilities. Looking back, Megan realized that she needed to simultaneously focus on both the managerial and leadership for learning aspects of her position throughout this initial year.

This case study illuminates several challenges that may be faced when leading a consolidated school and, hopefully, can provide some guidance to assist the principal with concurrently attending to forming the school culture, addressing structural elements of the new organization, and continuing to focus of student learning during the challenging first year of consolidation.

Endnotes

¹ No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 20 U.S.C. §§ 6301-7941 (2006).

² Pseudonyms were used for the names of the high schools, school districts, and all participants.

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