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Purpose: Required for Lifelong Learning

By Dr. Rick Repicky

Lifelong learners” are what educators crave. School mission statements highlight these words as schools purport to develop inquiring minds capable of sifting through myriad conflicting messages in search of the truth. Election seasons serve as Exhibit A as to why society needs lifelong, independent learners.

In order to lead, superintendents must also become lifelong learners to advance their students in a competitive world. In today’s economy “learning for all” must be more than a slogan—it is a moral imperative that forces district leaders to conquer previously undefeated learning obstacles. This requires new knowledge and new practice. Unfortunately, pressured educators sometimes avoid new initiatives, preferring to surrender to quotes like the following:

*“If a child’s MEAP score impacted a parents’ ability to claim them as a dependent on their taxes then I believe we’d see a lot more effort on the parent’s and child’s end to ensure their success.”*

– A frustrated teacher’s Facebook post

Schools cannot move forward if “learning for all” is countered in this manner by more than 10 percent of the staff. Since most school superintendents graduated in a past century—a time when society could afford to lose students to middle class factory jobs that have since dissipated— new learning is required to develop 21st century learners.

Fortunately, there is no problem developing superintendents who are lifelong learners. Superintendents learn everyday from the parade of unique situations they face and solve answering to the board, staff, and constituents. But these learning experiences, as challenging as they are, lie only at the expected managerial competency level of the job. Today’s superintendents must be more than managers of their districts. They must be educational leaders, and that requires a constant commitment to new learning and implementation.

Now, it must be stated that the demands on district leaders are enormous. Creating the right multi-million dollar budget formula has never been more difficult, and the onslaught of state initiatives has never been more pressing. Top these off with negotiations, relationships, discipline, bonds, etc., and it’s clear how arduous finding time to learn and lead a district in an educational direction can be.

The secret to becoming a lifelong learner under these trying conditions is PURPOSE. Unless a superintendent recognizes and answers the call to lead in a direction that awakes a sense of

purposeful passion, he or she will never find the time to focus on learning and leading of consequence.

It’s been said that parenting is an example of purpose trumping time. What non-parents could ever see themselves finding the time to do and pay for all that is required during the first 20+ years of children’s lives? Purpose is what drives parents. Purpose is required to drive the application of lifelong learning from educational leaders.

Each superintendent must find a niche that makes sense in terms of driving students to perform at a higher level. The niche can lead in such directions as technology as a tool, professional learning communities, common curriculum and assessment, varied instruction, staff evaluation, RtI, leadership, the arts—anything that advances student learning.

Void of educational purpose, routine pressures tend to squelch superintendents into managers, not educational leaders. While acceptable in the past, today’s superintendents must find a niche that puts their district and students a cut above. Effective leaders find their purpose, study it, and make it happen.

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