Nontraditional thinking in the central office

FULL TEXT

Headnote
Superintendents from business and the military apply a service mentality and results orientation
When Brian L. Benzel remembers his friend John Stanford, one of the earliest and most notable of America's new breed of nontraditional school superintendents, it is the spirit rather than the mechanics of Stanford's success that first comes to mind.
"John Stanford changed the public's perception of the Seattle school system," says Benzel, who was superintendent of a neighboring district when the former U.S. Army major general took charge in 1995. "He brought hope and energy to the system. His charismatic presence was demonstrated by a positive, 'can-do' attitude."
But that enthusiasm and energy, characteristic of the many new superintendents who have arrived from the fields of business, law and the military, focused on one thing-results. Stanford wanted a clear accounting of the district's financial health and the achievement of its students so that he knew exactly what needed to be done, just as he had had to do when he oversaw all transportation plans and programs for Operation Desert Storm.
Stanford set the tone by making students and parents and their complaints about bad service the first thing he talked about when he met reporters to discuss his new job. In Chicago and New York, San Diego and Oklahoma City, wherever a nontraditional superintendent has been hired by a school board eager for a change, the first administrative changes have almost always pushed school staff toward making more frequent and more accurate measurements of what is going on. The word "customers" was not so popular in schools before the nontraditional superintendents arrived, but many of them use it without embarrassment and their message is that the people being served must be satisfied.
Benzel, now the chief operating officer in the Seattle system, joined Stanford's management team when the former general was fighting a losing battle with the leukemia that would take his life in November 1998. He says Stanford "brought a rigorous focus on customer service. He created a unit in the district that still exists to coordinate and respond to the public: parents, citizens, businesses, etc. ... He proclaimed early and often that the system would be student-focused and he rallied the public, educators, support staff and students to that cause."

Bottom-Line Focus
This is the direction most school districts are now going, some with more success than others. The focus on students and parents has been interpreted by some as administrators putting too much emphasis on standards and testing and too much pressure on students who may not be able to attain new levels of achievement required for promotion or graduation.
But there seems no sign that the movement is slackening. If anything, more districts are looking for their own self-confident new superintendent who might, like John Stanford, have wide experience in another profession and know new ways to make schools work.
"The new emphasis is on results," says Michael Usdan, president of the Washington-based Institute for Educational Leadership, who with Stanford University professor Larry Cuban is compiling a book on the rapid change in school district governance. "That means student achievement. That is what they were brought in to do."
The insistence on school achievement rather than administrative comfort goes back to an early nontraditional
superintendent, Howard Fuller. He was the Milwaukee County health and human services director in 1991 when he switched jobs and became school superintendent.

"I eliminated the area superintendents and flattened out the bureaucracy, getting rid of a number of associate and assistant superintendents," he says. "My first budget contained no raises for anyone in the district. I did that to keep from cutting programs for kids" in the economic downturn of the early 1990s.

In each district with a new nontraditional superintendent, the approach has been slightly different, depending on customs, finances and personalities. In most cases, outsider methodology includes some of what Fuller and Stanford did, getting more money to where it would do the most good.

Arriving in Seattle in 1995 after four years as manager of Fulton County, Ga., Stanford worked with Joseph Olchefske, then his chief financial officer and now his successor as superintendent, on a weighted student funding process. Parents and students were given a chance to choose the school they wanted. When they moved, the money to meet their educational needs went with them. The formula approved by the Seattle school board in December 1996 allotted more money for students who had extra disadvantages, like poor English or low-income parents.

With help from Roger Erskine of the Seattle Education Association, the teachers' bargaining unit, Stanford changed the philosophy of the teacher contract. "Teacher seniority was eliminated as the basis for school selection and replaced with a process that allowed schools, with teachers as their leadership team, to select the staff at their school that would best meet the academic achievement plan the school developed to implement their program," Benzel says.

Finally, Stanford brought together all the services that had been allowed to develop their own fiefdoms in district offices. A new logistics department took over transportation, maintenance, landscaping, custodial work, warehouses, purchasing, printing and property management. Stanford thought such coordination was essential and "he was tenacious about being mission-driven," Benzel adds.

Better Analysis

Much the same has happened in other big cities that have brought in nontraditional superintendents. Paul Vallas, appointed CEO of the Chicago school system shortly after Stanford took charge in Seattle, was even more drastic in his cleansing and restructuring of his school system's broken administrative structure. "I pretty much replaced every department head and every program director, not only the top spot but I went two or three deep in some places," Vallas says.

He had been put in charge of the state-ordered overhaul of the Chicago system by Mayor Richard Daley after he had spent five years as the city budget director and director of revenue. He had taught public finance at Sangamon State University and been a revenue analyst in the state senate. Financial accountability was vital to his plans, and in the course of a few weeks he consolidated operations along corporate lines with many budgeting experts like himself in key positions.

In New York, nontraditional schools chancellor Harold O. Levy's 1 1/2-year reign has been distinguished by similarly strong efforts to reduce fat and improve analysis at his headquarters in Brooklyn. So far, he has left most matters of curricular reform to deputy chancellor for instruction Judith A. Rizzo.

Levy, an attorney who formerly worked for Citigroup, has cut away a thick outer layer of regulations and hired a half dozen senior executives with business and political backgrounds to get a better handle on how to measure and motivate school progress.

When I got here there was basically no quality control," Levy says. "When I first convened the senior cabinet there was basically no professional development person, no training person, no management systems person, no quality control person and not much of an internal audit function. Other than that, it was perfect."

A year later, he says, "we are a much more data-driven institution." Faced with a fractured administrative setup, Levy adds, "I have obliterated the line between the operational and the instructional sectors and established crosscutting task forces to make the place run in a tighter fashion."

In San Diego, another lawyer-turned-superintendent, former federal prosecutor Alan D. Bersin, reorganized his
central office to achieve a 20 percent reduction in staff, using the savings for teaching and learning. But he put much more emphasis in the first two years of his leadership of the 145,000-student system on raising achievement rather than just restructuring supervision.

Bersin announced that he planned to improve the quality of principals and vice principals. He looked for people who focused on student achievement and used money wisely. He ordered principals to begin spending at least two hours a day helping teachers improve their techniques.

Now, having succeeded in raising scores significantly in most of the city schools, Bersin says he is looking at the business side of the district office to seek more ways to reduce expenditures without harming vital services.

Customers First

When Bill Weitzel, a former business professor at University of Oklahoma, was named CEO of the Oklahoma City Public Schools last summer, the managerial consultant put his first emphasis, as Bersin did, on the quality and working styles of principals.

Weitzel established a site-based management system that gave principals more authority. But he says he could not go as far as he wanted because information systems—the factor Levy complained so much about in New Yorkwere not yet adequate to tell which principals were effective and which were not.

Weitzel also eagerly pursued the John Stanford approach of giving new life to the idea of customer service. He had been advising companies for 30 years on how to increase profits, and this seemed to him a very meaningful dimension to making schools work.

"We have had more than 35 meetings throughout the city in each neighborhood to provide citizens with opportunities to tell us what they think about our schools, our service to their children and to the communities in which the schools are located," Weitzel says. "They addressed difficulties related to the aged transportation system and to the buildings that average more than 47 years of age and have not been maintained due to lack of bond money."

One of the most energetic of the new nontraditional superintendents, former Air Force Maj. Gen. John C. Fryer Jr., has made many of the same moves. He has reached out to parents, worked on the leadership style of principals, tried to reduce inefficiencies and improved the quality of information. But he said he purposely refrained from making severe changes in his senior staff when in June 1998 he took over the schools in Duval County, Fla., which includes Jacksonville.

"I rarely got to choose what team I had in the Air Force," he says. "It was given to me. Over time, of course, I hired replacements whom I hand picked, and occasionally I fired someone. But I learned that the key to successful leadership is not necessarily in assembling the dream team, but in making a dream team of the one you have."

Instead, he asked questions that forced headquarters staff to reconsider their way of doing business. At a meeting to discuss a hodge-podge of reading programs, each with its own funding sources, he asked, "Can anyone tell me how many reading programs we have, what they are all intended to do, what they cost per student and what results we have seen?" The blank stares were followed by six weeks of staff review of all district academic programs and the abandonment of those that were duplicative or not working.

Fryer arranged for his staff and principals to learn the Kepner-Tregoe decision analysis system in which, he says, "tough work is put into defining the problem, the decision needed, the alternatives, the weights given to those alternatives and the risks associated with any chosen alternative."

He discontinued the practice of gathering principals monthly for long updates on policies and programs. Instead, he ordered that such information be sent out by memo and turned the monthly meetings into training sessions, led by invited experts, to immerse principals in the latest curricular advances. That way, he says, they could become strong instructional leaders.

On Florida's new school rating system, Fryer and his principals and teachers managed to increase the number of schools with the top grades of A or B from 18 to 31 and reduced the number of F schools from five to one. SAT scores have gone up, the Advanced Placement and International Baccalaureate programs have received national recognition and the chief researcher of the Third International Math and Science Study has called the district's
curriculum "world class."

Sharing Control

That emphasis on getting the best information on schools, making improvements and letting everyone know about them has been adopted by nontraditional superintendents in smaller school districts as well.

Michael Wank, formerly vice president of enrollment services for St. Francis College in Fort Wayne, Ind., says his career as a college admissions officer "was very customer oriented, customer driven. I had to get the good news out about my college and make sure contacts made were followed up. I also had to make sure that everyone in my office followed up, not just me."

Now installed as superintendent of the Seneca East Local Schools in Seneca, Ohio, Wank says he is "looking at students and parents as our customers, people who are actively involved in the product we offer." That attitude, he adds, "is a very positive way of keeping people informed and involved."

Wank says he is also giving principals and teachers more decision-making power. "I have asked the principals to take more control over the operations of their buildings rather than come to me for answers. It is more of a management model than education typically uses," he says. "I have also opened up the school decision-making process to the community on a much broader scale. When the community is involved, they really support the activities in the schools."

As a result, Wank says, "the community notices a lot more opportunities to get involved, and the staff notices that they are being held accountable but given authority to utilize their expertise. This makes some of them uncomfortable, but it's crucial if we are to have a well-run system that utilizes everyone's talents."

James Coolican, a retired Marine colonel who now runs the 9,200-student Peninsula School District in Gig Harbor, Wash., also put the emphasis on student learning, dramatizing his commitment with an unusual allocation of his time. "One third I would devote to the central office, one third to the community and one third to the classroom," he says. "I spend two days of every week in classes."

There were three assistant superintendents when he took the job in July 1999. He made one of them deputy superintendent for support and operations, effectively the day-to-day leader of the district for the two-thirds of the time Coolican is not in his office. He told principals to contact him directly whenever they liked.

"In the Marine Corps, the commanding officer has to be out with the troops," Coolican says. "I wanted the teachers and the building administrators to believe that the central office was there to support them and not the other way around."

Finding the superintendent sitting in the back of their classrooms has been unnerving for some teachers, but Coolican says he thinks they have become more comfortable with his presence and more willing to tell him what needs to be done to help their students. "I have never left a classroom and talked to a principal about anything that would be critical of a teacher, and they know that," he says.

Differing Skills

Once a district has taken on a nontraditional superintendent, can it ever go back to a boss with only educational credentials? There hasn't been enough time for this to happen very often, although the D.C. schools seemed to encounter few problems when veteran educator Arlene Ackerman replaced former Army Gen. Julius W. Becton Jr. as head of the system in 1998.

Ackerman, however, was a special case. She had worked with Stanford in Seattle and had a keen appreciation of the need for modern business techniques in large urban school districts.

As New York City's chancellor, Levy says mega-districts like his always are going to need leaders who have been supervisors in other fields. "It is clear to me that the person who sits in this job needs to have experience either running or being intimately involved with large complex organizations that are well run," he says. "The skill set of the superintendent of a large district needs to be radically different from the skill set of someone who runs a high school."

"That is not to say that instructional knowledge is not important," Levy adds. But it is necessary, he says, to have at least one of the top two people be comfortable with the requirements of results-oriented, quick-reacting corporate
management.

Personal Adventure

In most cases, nontraditional superintendents have not been in office long enough to assess their results in any scientific way. Their managerial experience tells them that premature congratulations can be deadly. 

"Anecdotally, the union president says that morale is higher now than anytime in the last 10 years," says Weitzel, who heads Oklahoma City’s schools. "Principals say they feel empowered even though we are not completely finished in moving to a site-based approach…. But we are not far enough into the change process to talk definitively about the positive changes."

Those few nontraditional superintendents who have been in the job for several years or finished their tours look back with some satisfaction that they helped bring the right changes. They also say they appreciate the freedom they enjoyed from having established their reputations in another field and being willing to risk failure in what was, for them, an adventure and not a job that would define their careers.

"The basic thing was my willingness to radically change the system," says Fuller, who led the Milwaukee system in the early 1990s. "Because I came in from the outside, I was not married to the system."

Vallas in Chicago told Illinois Issues magazine in 1999: "I'm in a great position. I don't want to be a lifetime school superintendent. I don't want to be an education consultant when I'm done here. I'm not setting the stage for a political office. If I physically survive this job and accomplish what I hope to accomplish and what the mayor hopes to accomplish, then my ticket is written: I'm going to heaven. I can go back and become a normal person and try to raise my kids and spend time with my family."

In Seattle, John Stanford's successor, Joseph Olchefske, has continued to make administrative changes. Like his mentor and predecessor, Olchefske also qualifies as a nontraditional superintendent. Before going to work for Stanford, he was the organizing executive of the Seattle office of Piper Jaffray, a brokerage and investment firm. He helped Stanford shift resources and balance the budget with the weighted student formula system. They also turned the deputy superintendent positions in the district into a chief academic officer to oversee schools and a chief operating officer to deal with their consolidated support services, as well as finance, human resources, technology, capital facilities, communications and government affairs.

The newest plan in Seattle is to make the administrative system support the goal of altering instruction to fit the new state learning standards. This is just as Stanford intended it, a matter of customer service. The district has developed a logo and a slogan for the effort, "Delivering the Dream." Once the board adopted the standards in 1999, Benzel says, the rollout "took on the look and feel of a comprehensive marketing and change campaign," with administrators worrying not only about what teachers were teaching but what students and parents understood of the nature and purpose of the changes.

From the Stanford administration to the Olchefske administration, Benzel says, improving each child's performance on the Washington Assessment of Student Learning tests has been the most important objective. A school district that adopted modern management techniques and made poor customer service a firing offense has seen the desired result, higher achievement. "Notable in the increases," Benzel says, "is the reality that students of color are improving the fastest. The district still has much growth and learning to achieve, but it is making steady and dramatic progress."

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