

Book Review

Educational Leadership in an Age of Accountability: The Virginia Experience, edited by Daniel L. Duke, Margaret Grogan, Pamela D. Tucker, and Walter F. Heinecke. Albany: SUNY Press, 2003, \$24.95.

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When I took over as principal of the school two years ago, we had such a mess with neighborhood gangs and drugs and just a total lack of respect among teachers and the students that we couldn't begin to really spend time on best instructional practice until just last summer. Then I got this memo from the district office that says we had been identified as a school in need of improvement and we needed to meet certain goals for our test scores or there would be severe consequences. We received a pacing guide and a textbook that in many ways contradicted what I and some teachers are coming to believe about best practice, but it's supposed to raise the test scores fast.

—elementary principal, urban school

Current federal policy (No Child Left Behind Act, 2002) holds all school districts accountable for the attainment of increasingly high student outcomes on standardized tests. More specifically, the No Child Left Behind Act stipulates that all schools—regardless of other challenges such as those described by the principal above—must meet “adequate yearly progress goals” toward 100% student proficiency on state tests. Schools that do not meet adequate yearly progress goals for 2 consecutive years are identified by districts as needing improvement. Furthermore, if a school identified as needing improvement does not make adequate yearly progress after 3 consecutive years, the district is required to offer public school choice to all students in that school and to provide low-achieving students within the school approximately \$500 to \$1,000 for additional educational services and summer school programs. Parents

in these schools may select private, church-related, and religiously affiliated organizations to provide these services to students. A school identified as needing improvement that fails to make adequate progress after 4 consecutive years will be subject to corrective action, including reconstitution, hiring of a private management contractor, conversion to a charter school, or staff restructuring. To be taken out of corrective action, a school must demonstrate adequate yearly progress for 2 consecutive years (ASCD, 2003).

In my instructional leadership classes at the University at Buffalo, discussions around accountability and related consequences are often heated, with some students convinced that academic standards and assessment goals will improve learning for all students and other students equally concerned that policies will limit local curriculum decisions, further separate schools by class, and end public school education as we know it. In particular, the urban school leaders in my classes argue that accountability mandates by themselves will do little to improve the lives of children and families in schools when resources are severely limited and teacher/student turnover rates are at an all-time high. These current and aspiring urban leaders look to the literature for examples of how to successfully lead schools with challenging populations in the current political context but often find more sympathy than direct answers or examples. In *Educational Leadership in an Age of Accountability: The Virginia Experience*, Daniel L. Duke, Margaret Grogan, Pamela D. Tucker, Walter F. Heinecke, and other chapter authors not only provide leaders with some examples of successful instructional leaders at various levels in Virginia but also provide thought-provoking material for class discussions and reflections.

Educational Leadership in an Age of Accountability: The Virginia Experience is a collection of empirical studies and general writings that explore the shifting responsibilities of Virginia school principals, superintendents, and department chairs as they strive to implement a statewide accountability plan. The Virginia accountability plan includes standards of learning, high-stakes tests, standards of accreditation, and annual school performance report cards. The chapter authors examine factors related to the implementation of various aspects of the Virginia accountability plan that are rele-

vant for educational leaders across the United States, including the fate of students who fail state tests, achievement differences between Black and White students, ethical issues surrounding accountability measures, and the increasingly political nature of instructional leadership and local school decisions. In the next several paragraphs, I briefly discuss the major points of each chapter that are helpful for current and aspiring instructional leaders in a variety of leadership positions and contexts.

The first chapter by Heinecke, Curry-Corcoran, and Moon provides a very informative historical perspective on the national context within which Virginia's accountability reform plan is implemented. By tracing the national and Virginia state evolution of the accountability movement over the past 25 years, the chapter authors revealed the values and underlying intents behind current federal and state reform policies that shape instructional leadership in today's schools. My instructional leadership students found the chapter's analysis of two fundamental models of accountability on the national policy agenda particularly insightful. As Heinecke, Curry-Corcoran, and Moon explain,

In the market version, schools are held accountable for student performance, usually on the basis of standardized test scores. Schools that do not meet performance standards are labeled "failing" and students are given the choice and, under some proposals, the financial vouchers, to switch schools. In the state-regulated model, students and schools are held accountable for achieving high standards based on standardized test results, schools are rated, and "underperforming" schools are subject to various consequences such as public humiliation, state sanctions, loss of accreditation, state takeover, and reassignment of personnel. (pp. 7-8)

In Chapter 2, Duke and Reck reveal the state-level politics surrounding the evolution of Virginia's accountability plan. Whereas a traditional model of the policy process (Kingdon, 1984) suggests that policy develops in discreet stages (i.e., agenda setting, policy formulation, implementation, and evaluation), Duke and Reck found that Virginia's three-decade quest for educational accountability cannot be captured in a set of linear stages. Duke and Reck state, "The evolution of state educational policy in Virginia has not

been a linear or conflict-free process. Rather, early initiatives paved the way for the current four-part accountability plan” (p. 37).

In Chapter 3, Duke and Tucker further narrow the focus to examine Virginia’s high-stakes graduation test. Specifically, Duke and Tucker report on a study that examined the initial efforts of 16 Virginia high schools with challenging populations to respond to the state accountability measures. Four types of high schools were identified for the study, based on two dimensions: need to respond and ability to respond to the state accountability mandates (low need/high ability, low need/low ability, high need/low ability, and high need/high ability).

Findings indicated that all 16 schools made some effort to respond to Virginia’s accountability plan. Across most of the high schools, the responses to the state accountability measures were similar, including increased curriculum coordination and focus, adjustments to mathematics course offerings, greater teacher collaboration, changes in instructional planning, changes in instructional practice, changes in classroom assessment, development of special programs, and increased quality control. Based on these findings, Duke and Tucker point to some hopeful implications, namely, an overall increase in test scores across Virginia, heightened levels of cooperation among teachers and administrators, and the renewed interest in instructional leadership among principals. At the same time, Duke and Tucker report several areas of concern, including the fear that teachers and administrators will limit course content to tested standards, the reduction or elimination of electives, loss of teacher autonomy, and limited financial support for high-quality programs to reach struggling learners.

In the fourth chapter, Tucker draws on the findings described in Chapter 3 to examine instructional leadership in the principalship. The high school principals in that study reported that there was no question their role was changing as a result of the reform initiative in Virginia. Specifically, their supervision work was more likely to focus on curriculum, instruction, staff development, and assessment than it had in the past. “Of course, the more routine tasks and their associated time demands have not disappeared. Attempting to juggle managerial and instructional responsibilities has increased the strain and tension of the job for individual principals”

(Steinberg, 2000, cited in Duke et al., 2003). Tucker concludes the chapter with a suggestion that the accountability movement may require a reinvented form of instructional leadership: "Leadership in an age of accountability requires not only pressure to achieve high academic standards and systemic conditions to support an instructional focus but also [district] assistance for individual principals to orchestrate such an effort at the school level" (p. 112). However, as DuFour and Eaker (1998) and many of my students pointed out, in the current political context of accountability, the devil of instructional leadership is in the details. Although Tucker's assertion about the reinvention of instructional leadership is logical in the context of her empirical findings, the chapter does not provide current or aspiring leaders with a clear picture of how they might reinvent instructional leadership in the political context of their own settings.

In Chapter 5, Grogan and Roland report on a study that examined what successful teachers and their principals were doing to prepare students for Virginia's standards of learning test. One of the major findings of the study is that both the teachers and principals were thoroughly engaged in the standards reform movement. Grogan and Roland conclude,

[The principals and teachers] were knowledgeable about the plan, accepting of the need to align curricula and teaching practices, and immersed in data. The teachers had a very good grasp of what they needed to do to be successful, including direct modeling of effective learning strategies, making efficient use of time, and providing a caring classroom environment. (p. 127)

In Chapter 6, Duke, Butin, and Sofka report on the results of a survey conducted to determine the effect of Virginia's accountability plan on high school English departments from the perspective of English department chairs. The survey was administered to 130 chairs, representing 45% of the high schools in the state. The chapter authors note that department chairs, although rarely queried in policy implementation research, are an important link in the high school leadership chain. Survey responses indicated that the chairs noted both positive effects and concerns resulting from curriculum

standards and statewide testing. On the positive side, chairs recognized that teachers were spending more time discussing curriculum matters and coordinating content coverage. Teachers were reported to be taking the state tests seriously and devoting considerable time preparing their students for the tests. Concerns included fears that teachers felt compelled to move quickly through course content and that higher order thinking skills were taking a backseat to memorization of facts. In conclusion, Duke, Butin, and Sofka suggest several ways in which the role of the department chair can be strengthened to support staff development for content teachers and support student learning.

In Chapter 7, Grogan and Sherman examine the student achievement gap revealed by Virginia's new standards of learning tests. Disaggregation of test data across Virginia showed persistent discrepancies in test scores for Black and White students. This test-score discrepancy provided the basis for interviews with 15 superintendents in Virginia. Most of the communities in the study were poor, with a low tax base and relatively high unemployment rates; however, one community was among the wealthiest in Virginia and four were described as representing a percentage of all income levels.

Grogan and Sherman found that awareness of the achievement gap had not yet prompted the development of strategies to significantly reduce the gap. Only two superintendents spoke of specific strategies they were using in their districts to eliminate the achievement gap. One additional superintendent mentioned strategies he was using to increase the graduation rate of African American students, but he did not specifically take actions to address the achievement gap in test scores. Some of the superintendents pointed out that if they were to expose the racial achievement gap to public scrutiny, they would be in danger of losing their jobs. On the other hand, Grogan and Sherman argue, today's superintendents have a "moral imperative to serve the needs of all their students" (p. 177).

In Chapter 8, Tucker and Grogan draw on Starratt's (1994) analytical framework involving the ethics of care, justice, and critique to examine Virginia educators' most frequently cited ethical con-

cerns arising from the accountability plan: (a) the injustice of using standardized testing and the unfairness of failing students on the basis of these one-dimensional assessments; (b) the harm of limiting instruction for the tests and remediation; and (c) the loss of teachers' individual rights, freedom, and autonomy in determining curriculum. An ethic of care has been used to justify teachers' instructional practices when teachers care about students who are experiencing personal hardships or struggling with the curriculum and thus do not expect them to perform as well as other students. A traditional ethic of justice demands that the school serve both the common good and the rights of the individuals in the school (Starratt, 1994). Starratt maintains that the ethic of critique raises the level of care to something more than an expression of pity or sympathy and raises justice to the ideal of social justice that recognizes inequalities and prompts action. Tucker and Grogan conclude,

Although teachers and administrators have a duty to accept the state mandated reforms, they do not have a duty to accept them uncritically. They must take the initiative to work for needed changes and to secure the necessary resources to meet the challenges encountered. (p. 195)

In the final chapter, Duke, Grogan, and Tucker reflect on educational leadership in an age of accountability:

When the first calls for instructional leadership were made in the early 1980s, educational administration programs were slow to respond. Educational leaders were not losing their jobs because of poor student performance. Schools and school districts were not faced with loss of accreditation and state takeover. Today, of course, the situation has changed. With the advent of serious consequences for poor student performance, educational leaders must possess the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to function as instructional leaders. (p. 209)

Finally, Duke, Grogan, and Tucker offer a suggestion for educational leadership training and raise a thought-provoking question. First, they argue that if educational administration and teacher

leadership programs are to rise to the challenge of accountability, they will need to provide instructional leadership training in three areas: (a) monitoring student achievement, (b) coordinating student assistance, and (c) supervising instructional improvement. Second, Duke, Grogan, and Tucker suggest,

The prevailing view is that leadership during this Age of Accountability has become more stressful, more political, more complex, and more time-consuming. There is another view, rarely voiced, that bears consideration, however. Accountability programs such as Virginia's just possibly could make the job of educational leadership easier. . . . For years, educational leaders have complained that the goals of public education are ambiguous. No longer can that claim be made, at least not in Virginia, where the goal is clear—achieve state accreditation. . . . The question, of course, that remains is whether educational leaders will embrace this clarity, or instead long for a return to ambiguity. (p. 232)

The final thoughts and question in this book prompted a lively debate in my instructional leadership class, with most students reluctant to choose one view or the other. Perhaps the school principal quoted at the beginning of this review summarized the urban leaders' thoughts best when she said,

There is no question that the clarity of our state standards and achievement goals give me as a principal more leverage to promote instructional change. The alternatives, however, are not ambiguous. There is no ambiguity to the increasing gang violence in this neighborhood. There is no ambiguity to the budget reductions that affect staff development and materials. There is no ambiguity to the fact that most of the teachers in my building are not the same teachers who were here when I came two years ago. There is no ambiguity in the great needs of children and families, and no ambiguity to the rewards of saving just one.

The examples and ideas in *Educational Leadership in an Age of Accountability* provided many other thought-provoking discussions in my instructional leadership classes, and I will use the book in future classes.

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