

4. No Throw-Away Children

Mary Leiker

Demographics can change rapidly in urban areas, especially when relatively prosperous (often white) families flee communities they perceive as declining. Minority and lower-income urban residents then migrate in. During the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, this happened to many “first-ring” or “inner-ring” suburbs near cities like Memphis, Detroit, and New Orleans. These towns lost more than half of their white population, with their schools becoming predominantly minority and experiencing substantial declines in educational quality and student achievement. Ironically, an opposite trend started after the economic crisis of the late 2000s, with relatively prosperous families moving back toward the inner ring to reduce their commute and exurban neighborhoods filling with foreclosures.

When communities change through migration and economic stress, the school districts face significant challenges—but also major opportunities. In the early 1990’s, Superintendent Mary Leiker and the school board of the Kentwood Public Schools in Michigan recognized that the influx of students from nearby Grand Rapids was changing the demographics of the traditionally Caucasian school district and community. Rather than focus on the increasing diversity as a deficit, they saw it as a way to strengthen the educational opportunities for all students. In their shared vision with the community, diversity became a tremendous asset for everyone’s learning.

Shortly after my appointment as Kentwood superintendent of schools in 1991, a racial issue set in motion a series of defining events that led us to clarify what we wanted to become as a school community. Two African American male students attacked a Caucasian student in the high school hallway. The boy’s injuries were so severe he required life support. The hearing that followed the incident involved thirty-three hours of testimony and four attorneys—one representing the white student, one the two black students, one the superintendent, and one the school board—with standing room only. At this time, the Ku Klux Klan actively recruited in the local newspaper. So for those thirty-three hours, middle-aged white men sat in the back of the school board room watching and waiting, and an African American community skeptically watched what we would do. It truly looked like we were headed for a crisis in the community. Ultimately, the two black students were expelled, which failed

to completely satisfy the white community and intensified the furor of the black community.

When I was appointed superintendent of schools in 1991, the student population was 9 percent minority and 10 percent at risk (based on low family income). At the elementary level, test scores were at 45 percent in meeting standards. I believe there's a seed of truth in every complaint; something was happening in the schools, and I needed to get to the bottom line. But when I first tried to investigate, the tension in the community increased even more. My family and I received threats on our lives from both whites and blacks. African Americans marched to my office with signs: "We want justice." Because I wasn't taking sides, neither group felt it could count on me.

It soon became clear that minority students weren't receiving the same opportunities. In the high school, few were enrolled in upper-level classes. Between September and March, in any given year, between eighty and 125 students were routinely kicked out of school—mostly minority students. Only two black students had been on the basketball team in ten years. In response to my questions, people said, "This is Kentwood, and that's the way we do things."

HOLDING DIFFICULT CONVERSATIONS

During this tense time, representatives from the NAACP and several other groups asked if we would be willing to work with the U.S. Department of Justice. I said, "Absolutely!" We needed someone with a different set of eyes to look at the situation, and I did not feel that a learning organization should have anything to hide. Whatever was discovered would be good.

For two years, the Department of Justice representative and I met once a month with a small group representing high school students and parents within the community. If we were going to make progress on the issues, we could not rush the process. Two years prevented premature closure and gave the community time to reflect.

We had long, difficult conversations that required all of us to set aside ingrained assumptions about each other. Listening was critical in moving to new understandings. The Department of Justice had stipulated "no media coverage," which allowed us to be frank and honest about our situation. We recognized that a lot of attitudes had to change among the staff. We needed more minority teachers; our numbers were abysmal. We had to challenge some prevailing assumptions that certain children could not learn. We set goals in purchasing and bidding contracts, plant services, business areas, and the interviewing process to ensure repre-

After sixteen years, Dr. Mary Leiker retired from the Kentwood School District in June 2007. The systems approach established during her tenure continues under the leadership of Dr. Scott Palczewski.

See Glenn Singleton and Curtis Linton, *Courageous Conversations About Race: A Field Guide for Achieving Equity in Schools* (Corwin Press, 2006) for strategies to break the silence about racial inequities in schools.

Our demographic diversity has strengthened the schools and community. Coming from a science background, I appreciate the importance of biodiversity and the interconnectivity in living systems. The more diversity you have, the stronger an ecosystem is.

Our district was talking about being customer-focused long before charter schools appeared on the scene. Now with so many schools of choice, parents can pull their kids out and send them to another school down the street or to a nearby district. The more diversity we have in school systems the stronger we can be in responding to rapidly changing conditions and the more flexible we can be in problem solving. —Scott Palczewski, Kentwood superintendent (2007–present).

sentation of diverse groups. We committed to continuous monitoring of our system to gauge how well we were achieving the new goals.

}} Also see “Public Engagement” by Ellen Bueschel, page 527.

Nothing is more difficult in a community than cultural change, because it shakes the very foundation of privilege and security. Our struggle in Kentwood exemplifies Ronald Heifetz’s writings on adaptive issues. The demographic changes and what they brought us could not be treated with technical fixes from the school superintendent. The school board had to be willing to let the community wrestle with the issue, and the superintendent could not try to cover it up or quietly make it go away to avoid disturbing people. You must disturb people; engage them in conversations that may be unpleasant in order for them to reach a higher level of learning and understanding. When I look at other superintendents, I can see that many are fearful of community conversations about diversity. And, when you’re fearful, you try to fix the problem rather than engage in adaptive work. We can celebrate this diversity if we look at it as a strength, not as a burden. We can make it a gift for our students, schools, and community.

}} See Ron Heifetz’ twelve questions, page 417; and his book, page 427.

RATCHETING UP EXPECTATIONS AND PERFORMANCE

I came away from the racial incident and our two years of intense deliberations with a number of questions. What was the lesson here? What was the opportunity? What might take the students and school district to a higher level of performance and a better reputation? The school board and I felt that we could show the rest of the country how to create a school district that did not simply accept differences but valued those differences for the strength they brought. We could become a district that attracted diverse students because of the excellent education they would receive. We *needed* the diversity to ensure that Kentwood students would be prepared for our global society. Students are handicapped if they are educated in an exclusive system.

During the years since then, Kentwood has demonstrated its belief in diversity. Back in 1991, at the time of the attack, the student population was 9 percent minority and 10 percent at risk (a measure based on family income). At the elementary level, test scores were at 45 percent in meeting state standards. In 2007, the year I retired, Kentwood had 40 percent minority students, with 42 percent at risk—and test scores at 89 percent. Of that 40 percent minority, African American students consti-

tuted 28 percent and refugees and immigrants from over fifty countries worldwide the other 12 percent. This demographic shift and increased academic performance of our students defies any predictions that might have been made in the 1990s.

How did we do it? We achieved it through a deeply held shared vision of excellence and equity for *all* students created by the school board, school staff, and community. The Board of Education’s vision set the context for our commitment: “Kentwood Public Schools will be a place of excitement and enthusiasm for education and an appreciation for diversity. Everyone will be encouraged to be a creative force in the development of an educational system for the future.” Too often such words are only rhetoric. Not here. This vision was lived out every day in the work we did.

Systems thinking became pivotal in moving us from seeing diversity as a deficit to seeing diversity as a tremendous asset. Instrumental in the work was a book called *The Key Work of School Boards*, developed by the National School Boards Association (NSBA). It focuses on student achievement and community engagement to promote student achievement, emphasizing that no action is taken in isolation. School boards must understand the interconnectedness of every decision, exploring possible reactions as well as the unintended consequences. There are eight action areas, but they are not distinct steps to be checked off. Rather they represent the whole that must be considered as the school board acts. The most critical aspect in our work involved the creation of a vision with the community, followed by setting high standards for every student. This positioned the professional staff to develop the necessary curriculum and instructional strategies to meet the needs of all students.

Making progress toward our vision and reaching the new standards required significant learning for everyone. My role shifted to one of facilitating the learning of others. I’ve worked with tremendous scholars, practitioners, and researchers over the years, and the learning I gained, I shared. I taught board members, central office administrators, and principals on a regular basis. During my time in Kentwood, we purchased and studied together about twenty-five books, and I led monthly sessions to promote the growth of the entire system. When I say the administrators were involved, I mean all the support administrators, too—Director of Food Services, Director of Transportation, Director of Plant Services. Everyone has a role in educating students. For instance, I tell custodians, “If you’re cleaning a floor and a child is having difficulty, I expect you to stop what you’re doing and attend to that child; a child is much more important than the floors.”

The NSBA framework involves eight key action areas:

- Vision (a shared statement on the desired future, often starting with student achievement)
- Standards (educational expectations)
- Assessment (tools and processes for measuring educational outcomes against the standards)
- Accountability (assigned responsibility for those outcomes)
- Alignment (resources, communication, planning, and program implementation all work together)
- Climate (the conditions for successful teaching and learning)
- Collaboration and community engagement (trust and confidence among all educational stakeholders, including educators, parents, business leaders, media, and other citizens)
- Continuous improvement (constantly seeking and planning new ways to improve the system).

For more in-depth information on the *Key Work of School Boards*, see <http://www.nsba.org/keywork> or Katheryn Gemberling, Carl Smith, and Joseph Villani, *The Key Work of School Boards Guidebook* (National School Boards Association, 2000).