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Educational Leadership for system-wide success of all children

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Abstract

The purpose with the paper is to analyse a change in a local school system. The motivation for the change process was to transform the educational leadership through building a professional learning organization in which the principals can act as value-driven leaders in support of their staff in relation to school democracy and social justice and student outcomes.

Background / Rationale - i.e. what needs it serves and how is it 'innovative' -

The point of departure for our paper is the conflict between the demand for more structure and a better use of resources *and* the school's need for basic cultural changes regarding school democracy and social justice through learning for both adults and children working in the school. This paper focuses on the relationship between learning, structure, culture, and leadership when the outcome should be a more democratic and socially acceptable school with high learning outcomes for all children.

Scope (Aims and Objectives) - a system-wide perspective?

The paper discusses an organizational change – re-structuring - in one large Swedish municipality. The purpose with the new organization is to create a structure of support for all principals and teachers in relation to the work of the board and the superintendent. The support structure involves superintendent meetings with all principals and with team leaders among the principals. All principals are working principal teams in small sub-districts within the school district that is governed by the school board. The leadership teams consist of between 3 to 9 principals. The new support organization will also include principal in-service training – re-culturing - through principals seminars to strengthen the teams and the individual principals in their work with school democracy and social justice. The purpose of the organization is to change the face of educational leadership through building a system wide professional learning organization for educational leaders, in which the principals can act as value-driven leaders in support of their staff. The leadership model and support structure they experience at the district level is intended to be a model that they can use in their schools.

Process - i.e. how it was implemented

In the spring of 2002 the school board in Umeå decided that a new organization should be introduced. The political decision to change the organization was formulated as 14 bullet points. The main focus was to have a flat organization with large freedom for individual principals in their schools. The bullet points also emphasize that the schools need more instructional or pedagogical leadership from the principals. The organization should also improve the administrative support for the schools and their principals. Equally important were to improve the channels for information and communication in order to take away the old culture that was viewed as hierarchical and top down with very limited transparency. These changes should also lead to greater support from the staff and also better understanding for the economic realities. Even if it is not spelled out clearly in the political decision, there is an expectation for both a structural and cultural change in the school district.

A new superintendent was hired and she started her work by meeting all principals and visit schools on several occasions. These meetings during the spring 2002 were the new school superintendent's way to prepare for the job. One important aspect at all meetings and conversations was that she described her vision for the new compulsory school system. The vision was a real challenge and everyone that took part in meetings and conversations understood that a lot of work was

involved in the implementation process. The change focus was to create new common traditions and a new transparent culture of the school administration and a structure that would support these ideas.

The superintendent had meetings with all principals on many occasions and she met with all her staff, about 3000 teachers, divided into 5 presentation groups. All staff then took part of the superintendent ideas and vision for the new organization. The language in all her presentations and contacts was important because it represented a break from the old organizational culture. The language and the ideas were based in a theoretical model that saw the relation between structure, culture, leadership as prerequisites for successful schools!

Resources - anticipated and used

Both authors have been involved in the work with creating, implementing and running the new democratic organization with a focus on social justice – one as researcher and the other as superintendent. The most important resource was the superintendent and her determination to lead most meetings with principals herself and be a model as a democratic, learning and communicative leader.

Results / Expected Outcomes - will it be successful

The democratic, learning and communicative leadership means being active in dialogues and understanding that the principal has and will continue to exercise democratic authority over the school's improvement agenda.

Questions that will be important to follow during the next years are how the principals and coordinating principals will exercise democratic authority over the school's improvement agenda in the new organization. One great challenge will be to implement the political reform of an inclusive school for all. The intention with the reform is to mix children of great talent with children in need of extra support for their learning. A reform that will need skilled and committed principal's for successful implementation. This will be a test of the new organization and the leadership style! Will the sub-districts work as learning organizations and be a decisive support for the principals in the leadership team? And will the communication work bottom up to the board and the superintendent in these matters so they can exercise their support to the coordinating principals? Creating high understanding among all staff and leaders of the political reform are of vital importance in the case of an inclusive school for all children!