

The Courage of Educational Leaders

One quality we don't hear discussed much in conversations about educational leadership is courage. Oh sure, it's mentioned in passing on the list of leadership characteristics, but few who write or speak about educational leadership dwell on it, or on why leaders need it, and in how many areas they will be called upon to use it. That's a significant oversight. If there ever was a profession where leaders need to exercise courage forcefully and frequently, it is education.

Yet, if you listen to most conversations about educational leadership, you are left with the impression that while courage is required of warriors, athletes, corporate leaders, and an occasional politician, education is too dandified a profession to require it of its leaders. How absurd! Can anyone imagine a principal or superintendent getting through a month, let alone a year, without having to face multiple challenges that demand courage?

Tests of Courage

During a school budget presentation at a town meeting years ago, I was challenged by a well-known heckler. He suggested that, given the town's fiscal constraints, educators like me and my colleagues should demonstrate our commitment to children, if we had any, by agreeing to roll back our salaries by 3 percent. He, too, was a town employee and there was silence in the hall when I asked him politely if he and his colleagues were willing to show the way by doing what he was suggesting others should do. Was the silence approval or disapproval of my challenge? It was hard to tell in that highly charged environment. The point is that it would have been far easier to let a cynical comment like his pass. But at what price? At the price of letting a bully characterize a group of committed educators as selfish and indifferent to the needs of school children if they didn't agree to roll back their already meager salaries.

There also are tests of courage that school leaders face on a daily basis within their own schools. High-maintenance


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parents, out-of-control kids, and community members who say they value education often don't value it enough to support teachers by giving them proper respect for their judgment and professionalism.

During my career as a school leader, I faced threats of physical violence and character assassination from teachers, parents, and students. There are few school leaders who have never had to face such threats; I personally don't know of any. With the advent of the Internet, there is even greater risk that a disgruntled individual can severely damage or even destroy a school leader's reputation with false accusations. The leader's challenge is to persevere in the face of what are often very real threats. I have come home on more than one occasion and slept on the couch in the living room, thinking that if an individual came to do what he or she threatened to do, my wife and children had at least a fighting chance of escaping the consequence. But even when no such threat is at hand, it is no easy task to face the

resentment of a disgruntled employee, the wrath of an unhappy parent, or the rage of a student who is out of control and must be disciplined.

Every week, educational leaders face tests that challenge them to exercise the courage of their convictions. Why don't we recognize and celebrate more often the courage demonstrated by our colleagues? Does a false sense of humility keep us from doing this or is it that we just don't consider courage as worthy of notice as other leadership qualities, such as vision, focus, and trust? Whatever the reason(s), we need to reassess the cost of such an omission. Those who will one day join us in educational leadership positions need to know that courage is a quality they will need in abundance and those of us already in leadership roles need to support one another by talking more openly about the tests of courage we've had to face.

Courage doesn't demand that we win every battle, but only that we don't run away from them. It is not hubristic to recognize and celebrate courage in education; it is inspirational. Doing so inspires those who are currently in the profession and those who may one day have the courage to join it. 

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HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

The author believes that principals should be more forthright about the courage they exercise in fulfilling their daily duties. Why don't many school leaders recognize and celebrate more often the courage demonstrated by their colleagues? Is courage truly an important quality principals should have?

Muster up the courage to share your thoughts and opinions with other principals by going to the Principals' Office blog at <http://naesp.typepad.com> and clicking on "Speaking Out" under the Categories section.