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Try a new approach in selecting superintendent

By, Bill McHenry

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I was a public school teacher. For 10 years after retiring from the Marine Corps, I taught your kids; they came in all shapes, sizes, colors, economic and social backgrounds, and intellectual ability. I loved the job. I genuinely liked most of the kids and tolerated those few I didn't. I was, however, not particularly impressed with the unaccountable "system" of public education and was even less impressed with the entrenched career bureaucrats and representatives of vested interests that manage it. That is why I left teaching.

It is why others leave. It's not the money, nor is it the workload. It is dissatisfaction and frustration with the system and the leadership.

Many of the party faithful will write expressing outrage at my comments and predictably attack me personally. That is to be expected. But contrary to what you have often read, not all who teach in public school think alike. We may be liberal, independent or conservative and routinely fall out on all sides on most social issues. When anyone says they speak for all of us, they are just flat out wrong. Many strongly support the No Child Left Behind Act, believe that accountability is not necessarily a plot hatched by a vast right wing conspiracy, and that much of the criticism levied against public education is warranted.

Public education in many ways is like Iraq; a flawed strategy superbly executed by dedicated professionals. Those in the trenches do a pretty good job. Those making the strategic decisions, setting priorities, and allocating resources are clearly not.

Who should manage?

There is a reason doctors don't administrate hospitals. For the same reasons, educators should not be managing education. Be a principal? Maybe. Be responsible for district or state level facilities and capital outlays, interaction with local and state agencies, revenue projections, budgeting, human resources, and, most of all, strategic planning and efficient resource allocation? Not a good idea, especially when it comes to resolving systemic challenges in a rapidly changing environment, according to Arthur Levine, president of the Teachers College at Columbia University.

In what is not a surprise to most front-line teachers, Levine stated in a recently released study that the "superintendents and principals who run the nation's schools are unprepared for their jobs." This is understandable given that it usually not the teachers that need fixing. Most often what requires attention are things like inventory control and distribution, transportation, facilities, maintenance, and organizational structure. These are functions that suck the dollars out of a consistently slim discretionary budget and things that career education bureaucrats have little to no experience with managing.

It's not that education administrators are purposefully inept; but as a rule they have neither the management training nor the leadership ability required to run a large multi-functional organization. And public education is, in reality, just such an organization, for only a portion of public schooling really deals with the specifics of education. Many of the challenges facing education are strikingly similar to those confronting most corporate organizations.

No mission focus

Compounding this routine ineptness is a strategic decision process that lacks mission focus. Rather than giving the average kid the skills to successfully enter a dynamic and challenging work force, education has become a means to an end for several predictable constituencies whose surrogates generally reside on school boards. Sadly, they all share mutually supporting agendas. Among these are newly rich landed gentry and even richer patron families, developers and realtors. And let's not forget the scores of "Parents for This and That" committees actively lobbying for their kids' interest at the zero sum expense of other kids who have no advocacy. These groups all have power of one form or another. Rarely is it used to further the plight of the average kid who just wants a decent education. Rarely is the Special Education kid as important as the quarterback. Rarely do superintendents buck the system that promoted them in the first place.

Can this be fixed? Maybe. But for that to happen, how the leaders of the organization are selected must be reevaluated and changed. Leadership is more than being liked. Leadership has a moral quality that could and should be the basis for real system change in a system that desperately needs changing.

The question is: Does the community have the strength of character and care enough about its children to challenge the powerful status quo selecting the next superintendent? And, once done, will the community reward or punish moral and efficient yet unpopular decisions? Or will they, as I imagine will happen, "round up the usual suspects"? There is a choice.

Bill McHenry holds a master's degree in public policy and a doctorate in education. He is a program director for the Department of Defense and can be reached at william.e.mchenry@usmc.mil.

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