

Preserving the Promise of Equity in Public Education

Elementary and middle school principals must champion the opportunity for all children to have learning experiences that help them achieve their full potential.

Vision 2021 Foresight Brief

For the first decade of the 21st century, school choice proves to be a popular public policy. Baby Boomers trust free market approaches to deliver results and as consumers they like having it their way in the marketplace. People with the means and smarts secure the best for their children. However, by 2021 the nation's growing immigrant and minority population has made attacking this two-tier system a priority to restore the American dream of equal opportunity through education.

As more parents exercise school choice, principals of public schools find that like their private school counterparts they must market their schools to prospective students. In this open market, school leadership can become an important differentiator for selective parents. Principals and parents will become allies in assuring that their school's brand has value in the marketplace.

A countervailing force may soon alter the educational landscape. As immigrant families become more politically active in their communities as taxpaying citizens, they are likely to make emboldened demands for civil rights and privileges, including access to quality education. However, school districts can expect to find it increasingly difficult to convince local residents, including retiring Baby Boomers, to support tax increases and bond referendums to enhance educational opportunity.

At the same time, the rapid influx of immigrant students will increase the financial burden on school systems that are already being squeezed. Overall declines in financial support added to more targeted funds from federal and state governments have left many schools struggling to meet demands for professional development and infrastructure. State and local resources for public education have proven insufficient to cover the current requirements of most public school systems, especially in terms of support for principal and teacher preparation and development programs.¹ Inequities in funding and the low levels of local funding have left many school facilities, especially in low-income areas, in sore need of repair.² These funding related issues will become particularly acute for public schools in most minority communities.

Technological innovation in the classroom is reshaping education, from social networking to interactive learning games to the evolution of virtual schools. However,

¹ Retrieved 10/18/2006 at:

http://www.eric.ed.gov/ERICDocs/data/ericdocs2/content_storage_01/0000000b/80/0d/79/70.pdf

² Retrieved 10/20/2006 at http://seli.stanford.edu/research/documents/finance_policy_mid-course.pdf

as with any new technologies, the rich get access well before the poor. Educators are very concerned about the digital divide, and their willingness to champion equity will foster decisions that help close the gap. The development of low-cost computers and expanding wireless networks will make connectivity achievable for many disadvantaged students, but principals will have to remain vigilant – and on top of the latest innovations – to ensure that their students do not fall behind.

Over the next five to ten years, No Child Left Behind and school accountability laws will draw attention to the plight of poor and minority students in failing schools. Using the vast amount of data available, educators and policymakers will agree on the level of effort required to achieve equity. Problems outside of the scope of standardization still impact standardized results. Poverty and the recent epidemic of childhood obesity, for example, almost certainly have health effects which impact academics. This will lead to increased funding for after school activities, extended year programs and improvements in the life conditions of students.

Provocative Questions for Board Leadership

- Can schools modify or reverse the trend of a growing gap between the prospects for the poor and the rich?
- Will parents still find ways to use education to transmit social advantage to their children?
- Do the majority of elementary and middle school principals have what it will take to secure the resources their schools need?
- How will the needs of minority, rural and inner city kids be met by schools in the future?
- Can every school be a school of choice?
- What disparity reducing strategies will prove most effective in reducing the have-not gap around technology?

Opportunities for Leadership

- ✓ All schools can position themselves as “schools of choice” by offering distinctive school brands designed to serve specialized needs and interests.
- ✓ Principals can become the recognizable face of their school, actively promoting its brand in the community and highlighting the services it offers to students.
- ✓ If immigrant and minority parents do decide to organize their growing numbers into a political force for education, principals can be key allies in organizing at the community, state and federal level.