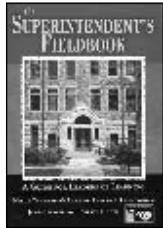




STEERING SCHOOLS TO SUCCESS

BY DAVIDA FOX-MELANSON AND DEBRA LYNEIS



**The
Superintendent's
Fieldbook**
by Nelda Cambron-
McCabe et al.

The *Superintendent's Fieldbook: A Guide for Leaders of Learning* by Nelda Cambron-McCabe, Luvern L. Cunningham, James Harvey, and Robert H. Koff (Corwin Press, 2004) belongs on the desk of every current and aspiring school superintendent. It is also a useful guide for school board members, teachers, principals, union leaders, community leaders, government officials, and faculty at colleges of education—anyone who cares about working with superintendents to improve the quality of education for students. Drawn from the experiences of superintendents from around the country who participated in the decade-long Danforth Foundation Forum for the American Superintendent, the *Fieldbook* provides an accessible, thoughtful, and insightful understanding of the superintendency, its challenges, and its responsibilities in times of rapid change.

Metaphors for Change

American schools are under intense scrutiny and pressure to improve. Superintendents face enormous and unrelenting demands, but also have many opportunities to effect change and benefit kids. The *Fieldbook* offers superintendents a welcome chance to stop and think, understand their roles as leaders of learning, frame their views, and plan their actions in the face of rising crises. Two sets of metaphors in the book are particularly helpful.

First are the seven “commonplaces,” or stakes in the ground, of school leadership. The authors caution that “you cannot be a fully effective superintendent unless you master them,” so they devote a chapter to each.

- Superintendents must skillfully *lead* their schools in addressing seemingly intractable problems; this means much more than just managing school operations.
- Superintendents must effectively lead within a *governance* structure that includes diverse participants from school boards to unions.
- They must understand *standards and assessments* inside and out, period.
- They must move into the sensitive arena of *race and class*, bringing people and resources together to close achievement gaps.

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- They must actively develop competent *principals* and constantly remind themselves that the most important work in schools happens with kids in the classroom.
- Superintendents must learn to *collaborate* with other agencies beyond the school walls that also serve kids.
- Finally, superintendents must *engage their communities* in their schools with an outreach philosophy that is more partnership than public relations.

Each of these items is a huge challenge; none can be ignored. Fortunately, the authors give readers a chance to think about them and learn from the

experience and straightforward suggestions of others. They outline the skills that every superintendent must master and at the same time put the demands of the job into perspective.

Another set of metaphors describes school districts. Every organization has an implicit image of itself that has developed over time. These mental models shape how the school district functions, views its responsibilities, and responds to change. The authors describe eight distinct school district metaphors. For example, some school districts function as machines, with traditional hierarchical structures and expectations. Others are emerging learning organizations, with an emphasis on interdependence, collaboration, and adaptation to change.

Readers will recognize their home district in these descriptions, but this is much more than an academic exercise. Superintendents must understand these unspoken images in order to know how issues arise and, more importantly, how to craft solutions that will be accepted and work in their particular context. Each kind of district has its own patterns for dealing with the seven commonplaces of leadership, and each has different expectations for the role of the superintendent. Thus, it behooves the savvy superintendent to understand the playing field.

Learning to Improve Schools

The *Fieldbook* is a practical reference, designed to be kept handy and consulted as needed. The book's format makes the new ideas it offers accessible and appealing to different learning styles. Each chapter balances theory and research with first-hand stories and tried-and-true suggestions from superintendents in the field. There are tables and charts for quick review, as well as many pertinent sidebars with

references for further information. The authors include cautions about common pitfalls and controversies, along with specific tools and strategies for managing conflict and keeping a personal balance in a difficult job. Each chapter concludes with probing questions for reflective practice.

An early chapter on leadership includes a section on creating a learning organization. Through this process, a district embraces a common language and develops a collective intelligence to create its own future. The *Fieldbook* briefly describes Senge's five disciplines of organizational learning—personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, team learning, and systems thinking—as they apply to improving learning in schools. It provides brief descriptions of

the tools, ready to use: systems thinking to look beyond events to the patterns, structures, and mental models driving behavior; the “ladder of inference” to surface underlying assumptions; and dialogue to enhance learning conversations. Each concept is illustrated by a story told by a different practitioner.

Systems thinking tools come up again in the chapter on standards and assessment. Readers glimpse the underlying problems in improving student performance through the lens of the “shifting the burden” systems archetype. The “quick fix” of focusing on improving test scores undermines the longer-term goal of sustaining learning improvement. Here, systems thinking tools lend a richness to the discussion and a refreshing new

approach to an old problem.

Superintendents who use the *Fieldbook* as a guide can become effective leaders of learning. Although many of the thornier issues discussed may have a higher profile and greater urgency in large urban districts, there is sound advice and affirmation for forward-thinking leaders everywhere.



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