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The Many P's of Policy

School leaders are confronted with a vast array of directives, laws, rules, and procedures every day. Many of these are labeled *policy.* But the word *policy* has become a vague and sometimes charged term in both schools and the larger society. What *is* policy? Is it a broad statement of value or guiding principles? Is it a program? Is it a set of procedures? Is policy simply current practice? These are some of the many P's of policy: principles, programs, procedures, and practice. These aspects of school organization and operation could be described as *policy* in some sense, but if they are *all* policy, the word loses some of its power, becoming empty and virtually void of meaning. How can school leaders sort out these meanings in a way that makes sense for the core of their practice—instructional leadership? Specifically, how do leaders of dynamic schools navigate the confusing language and the varying pressures of the many P's of policy so that they can take charge of change?

What Are Dynamic Schools?

Dynamic schools are schools that take charge of the many policies confronting them. Rather than reacting to and being driven by the many and diverse forces that impact schools or pretending that such forces do not exist, the leaders of dynamic schools see them as choices and seize them as opportunities for learning and improvement. As a result, a dynamic school continually changes and improves. These schools respond rather than react. They choose innovation and activity to address the needs they see and the demands they experience. Their environments are active, collaborative, contributing, and receiving as opposed to static and rejecting.

Dynamic schools have always existed, in legends and in research. Decades ago, studies that examined the processes of school change repeatedly found successful schools that adapted substantial innovations to address multiple problems in their own contexts (see, e.g., Berman & McLaughlin, 1975; Huberman & Miles, 1984; Louis & Miles, 1990). Sara Lawrence Lightfoot writes about dynamic schools in *The Good High School* (1983), and John Goodlad pictures them in *A Place Called School* (1984). In *Horace's School* (1992), Ted Sizer offers a prototype of a dynamic school. More recently, Elmore and Burney (1997) described certain schools in New York City that demonstrate strong instructional focus, staff involvement in continuous professional development, supportive community relationships, high quality student work, and facilitative principal leadership.

In *Principals of Dynamic Schools*, Rallis and Goldring (2000) define and illustrate dynamic schools that use internal strengths to support and adopt a variety of changes. Their research identifies five characteristics that support improvement: (1) facilitative, connected, and supportive principals; (2) teachers motivated and willing to act toward improvement; (3) adequate resources (not necessarily financial); (4) availability of programmatic and curricular options; and (5) sustained parent and community engagement. These characteristics interact, empowering the school community to choose and shape its own policies, programs, procedures, and practices.

Policy, Program, Procedure, or Practice?

To help sort out the confusion of terms, we offer the following ways of thinking about four of the P's. *Policy* is a broad statement of values, a desired future state, a set of conditions preferable to current ones. For example, the international policy Education for All (EFA) asserts that schooling should be made available and accessible to all children. For those nations that adopted the policy, this broad statement of value or set of preferred conditions became the guiding ideal for more refined education policies. As another example, the U.S. policy that all children should be offered learning in the least restrictive environment (LRE), regardless of learning or physical disability, is a similar statement describing a set of preferred conditions. Like EFA, LRE has been translated into more focused policy statements (though certainly not without controversy). It may be useful to think about broad statements of value as uppercase *Policy*, with articulation of lowercase *policies* helping to focus and target action. We envision a range of policies, from those that are more sweeping in scope and application to those that are more focused. In the case of EFA, governments and ministries of education developed more focused policy statements that articulated specific targets: All girls should be able to attend primary school, children in rural areas should have access to primary school, and so on. In the case of LRE, state governments and districts articulated policies that focused on children with specific disabilities. In each case, more focused policies emerged from the broad Policy statements.

Both broader policy statements and more focused policies typically lead to specific programs or initiatives to help realize the policies' intent. These *programs* may be focused at various levels (national, state, district, region, local), but all are more specific than broad policy statements. A program, then, emerges from a policy as an initiative that targets a particular subsector of or role group within the education system. An example of a program emanating from the LRE policy would be a school district's initiative supporting the inclusion of students with learning disabilities in regular education classrooms. An example of a program stemming from the EFA policy would be a ministry's initiative to construct more primary school buildings. Programs still respond to the questions, "What do we want to do? What is our preferred target for action?" They do not yet stipulate the precise mechanisms—the procedures—for implementing the larger policy. *Procedures* are the rules, the guidelines, the laws that stipulate exactly how a program or policy is to be implemented. In this way, they represent the *how*, while policies and programs represent the *what*. Once politicians and other stakeholders have determined what they want to do—what is the preferred state—they consider how they will go about doing it. Procedures represent the specific actions that can and cannot be taken. Unfortunately, many times procedures are confused with the policy itself, while in fact a set of procedures represents one choice among many of how to achieve the goals of a policy or program.

Consider a school leader saying, "Our policy is that children who are tardy must go to the office to get a late slip." This is not a policy; it is a procedure that implements a policy about school attendance. The policy would be: "Children are expected to come to school on time." Similarly, how a school district identifies its students with disabilities and determines which services are to be delivered to these children is neither policy nor program. While driven by the LRE policy and the programs available in the district, identification and service determination are procedures that operationalize the policy in the schools and place students in the programs.

Practice is yet another level of implementation of broad policy goals. Often described as "the way we do things around here," practice is the routinized behaviors and actions that constitute the everyday school world. A school leader might say, "Our practice is to ensure that all students achieve at high levels." This statement is better understood as an overall school policy (nested within district, state, and national policies about student performance). We might reasonably ask, "What practices do you encourage in your school to move toward this goal?"

What is *not* said or enacted may also be policy. A vignette Sharon remembers from her years as a school principal illustrates the use of the term *policy* in the informal sense. The school nurse approached her, asking that students rinse their mouths with fluoride every morning. The town water did not contain fluoride, so the nurse was concerned that students could develop cavities unless the school intervened. Sharon thought that this seemed a reasonable request but also that it would take up important instructional time. Her response to the nurse was, "I'm sorry, but it's our policy not to use instructional time for noninstructional activities." She realized, of course, that this policy could not be found in the school's policies and procedures manual, but it did, nevertheless, represent an important principle that drove everyday practices. To this extent, practices themselves—"the way we do things around here"—are, in effect, de facto policy and are often described that way.

Thus, policies and programs articulate the *what*—the preferred directions or state—while procedures and practices represent the *how*—the specific rules or laws and actions that will help us move in those preferred directions.

Our primary purpose in the above discussion is to help school leaders sort out the distinctions between *what* they and their constituents want to do (or must do by directive or law) and *how* they are going to do it. Some policies are highly constraining—there are few degrees of freedom or choice in taking action. Others are more discretionary, opening up spaces for action that moves a school toward a more socially just and caring learning organization. Our experience in schools suggests that the most difficult debates (often acrimonious) occur about *how*, not *what*.

Where Does Policy Come From?

Policymaking, whether at the international, national, state, district, or local school level, is inevitably a political process, because it entails developing definitions of *a good society*. Since reasonable people will disagree about what constitutes a good society, figuring it out entails deliberation and negotiation among various stakeholders. Policymaking is also political because it suggests the force of law. Not all policies are enacted into law (consider *A Nation at Risk* [United States Department of Education, 1983]), but there is usually the likelihood that laws will come into play.

Policy comes from several sources: international bodies, national governments, states, districts, and of course local practices. A specific policy may articulate a way to move forward—a preferred state—or confirm current practice. Consider the U.S. Supreme Court. Some of its decisions try to shape human behavior, as in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954). Others confirm that we already act in a particular way, as (unfortunately) in the earlier *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896) case.

In the everyday world of schools, however, policies are often seen as something done to somebody else, moving down the hierarchical chain, rarely bubbling up from the world of practice to the world of policymakers. Many school policies are set externally and considered policies from above. As a teacher recently commented in a meeting, "We don't have a technology integration policy; we have a technology *imposition* policy." Implementing external policies at the local level can be difficult partly because they call for changes in how things are done and thus may challenge local policies and practices.

At the same time, policies *do* originate at the local level. Local policies may be more manageable for school leaders because they have come from specific local events or in response to local issues (as we will illustrate in Chapter 4, which focuses on immigrant policy). However, externally mandated and internally driven policies may conflict. Think of policies as nested—but not neatly—within an intricate web. Schools are at the center of the web because they are where policies hit the ground.

What Do School Leaders Say About Policy?

A commissioner of education earmarks $50 million to support early childhood education; a superintendent eliminates a program for the gifted and talented; a high school principal detracks the science curriculum. Each action calls for changes at the local level. Each is a response to an important question: What new directions should we move in? And each has implications for further questions: What practices will need to change? What resources will be required? Where will they be allocated? The early childhood education initiative is a state level policy shift; the elimination of the program for the gifted and talented is a district policy decision with implications for resource reallocation; the science curriculum detracking decision is a school level statement supporting equal access for all children to high-quality curriculum. Policies set direction, reflect existing practices or establish new ones, and call for the allocation of resources to further their goals.

When we interviewed school board members about their roles, a common answer was: "Well, you know, we make policy." When we asked what *making policy* entailed, the answers were many:

- "Making decisions."
- "Voting on issues."
- "Deciding what we should do in specific instances."
- "Choosing programs and the like."
- "I'm not sure."

We also asked school administrators what they considered policy to be. Their answers cover a range of possibilities:

- "What the state and feds tell us to do."
- "You know, laws."
- "What the school board does—*they* make policy."
- "Isn't it like mandates? Like NCLB [No Child Left Behind]. That's policy—it sets down expectations and how to do it."
- "I'd say it is our values, really—like it is our policy to do this or that."

Few educators are comfortable with policy—and for good reason. As we have already noted, policy has multiple, sometimes conflicting, meanings. We argue that school leaders will find it useful to try to distinguish between policies, programs, procedures, and practices:

- Policies: the valued states
- Programs: the broad initiatives that move the school toward the valued states
- Procedures and practice: specific ways to implement programs

Schools and other organizations typically have a manual called *Policies and Procedures*. In daily conversation, procedures are often mistaken for policies. Just as we encourage school leaders to recognize the sometimes fuzzy distinction between policy and practice, we encourage them to differentiate between formal policy and the often also formal procedures that are used to implement them. An example is elaborated in Chapter 7, which addresses school climate.

So far, we have tried to demystify policy, defining and untangling the web and situating ourselves in action and practice—that is, policy implementation. Our ideas are grounded in several assumptions. First, we believe that schools, as centers of learning, should create environments for individual and group self-expression and self-identification (Dewey, 1958). Second, school leadership should be democratic, fostering meaningful participation and building capacity for participants to direct their own futures within a shared framework and common purposes (Gale & Densmore, 2003). We now move to a discussion of the importance of deliberative processes as ways of practicing democratic principles. School leaders have choices about policy implementation; they can take charge of these choices—they can be proactive instead of reactive (see Rallis & Goldring, 2000). We argue that school leaders should be guided in their choices by the ethics of justice and caring, which are discussed in Chapter 2.

Policy Implementation as Local Deliberative Process

Education policies are seldom implemented exactly as intended. State-initiated policy, for example, can be translated and retranslated many times before reaching the classroom. Even policies with the force of law can be intentionally or unintentionally adapted to fit local conditions. Recall Proposition 227, the English for the Children initiative, which effectively banned bilingual education in California in 1998. Subsequent studies showed that several classroom teachers, and in some cases entire districts, maintained bilingual education in spite of, and indeed in violation of, the law (e.g., Garcia & Curry-Rodriguez, 2000; Stritikus, 2002). In short, policies are subject to divergent interpretations, adaptations, circumvention, and of course compliance.

Educational leaders at the district and school levels are faced with both interpreting and implementing policies from above and developing and implementing their own policies. Districts receive policy directives as state regulations, but they must draw their own interpretations. Even the most prescriptive and straightforward regulations can be translated differently across districts. By and large, districts do make attempts to abide by the policy. Still, policies running contrary to existing values require a form of negotiation—a give-and-take—such that the intent of the policy "fits" in that local context.

So how do principals make sense of initiatives and programs amid a wide array of competing tensions? How do they accommodate myriad and sometimes conflicting demands?

In this book, we encourage school leaders to engage in a critically reflective process, described in Chapter 2, that deepens their understanding of their own values and moral stances. Coupled with this, however, should be a public deliberative process that engages the multiple voices—sometimes oppositional—that have a legitimate place in the policy conversation. Public deliberation demands that school leaders span the boundaries across these differing voices (Rallis & Goldring, 2000). School leaders who effectively facilitate the implementation of policy take stands based on their own personal values and ethics *and* include the values and dispositions of the community. These disparate voices come together through collective inquiry—public deliberation. Thus school leaders engage in a very personal, individual reasoning process in order to more mindfully facilitate the wider process of democratic deliberation. They are *stewards* of the public trust.

Democratic deliberation recognizes that citizen participation in discussions and decisions about public matters is crucial to building mutual understanding and common goals for action for the common good. We view democracy as a celebration of differences of opinion about the common good and at the same time the building of a society that can forge agreements through these differences. People come together through the need to address concerns they share, but they do not necessarily share common values or perspectives on the right way forward. According to Rallis, Shibles, and Swanson (2002), conflict is often central to this process:

> Democracy is an organic, messy business. Governance structures . . . endure because they tolerate ambiguity and multiple perspectives. Conflict is inherent in the interaction

> of groups within these structures. Democracy was built on conflict so its practice should celebrate ambiguity and individual differences. In fact, the goals of democratic communities are contradictory and non-rational: Democracy encourages expression of individual differences at the same time it aims to bind groups together into a larger whole; it fosters both independence and interdependence; it supports both the individual and the social organism (Barth, 1990; Lieberman, Falk, & Alexander, 1995; Starratt, 1997). People in democratic communities believe they can "influence members of the group and are themselves influenced by others" (Hobbs et al., 1984, p. 41). (p. 252)

Some argue that policymaking can happen only in communities: public policy is about communities trying to achieve something *as* a community (see Stone, 1988). And this involves conflict and negotiation. Therefore, policies may be seen as "temporary resolutions of conflict" (Stone, 1988, p. 10). The purpose of democratic deliberation is to turn conflict into integrative resolutions that, albeit temporary, permit the community to act collaboratively. To reach this integrative state, democratic deliberation draws on certain principles:

- Commitment to respect for the natural pluralism of values and aims within the community
- Acknowledgment and protection of minority views rather than domination by majority rule
- Expectation that each individual will make his or her reasoning transparent to the others
- Vigilance to ensure that all relevant parties have voice and that power imbalances are neutralized
- Creation and maintenance of a trusting and safe environment
- Reliance on dialogic discourse that
    - moves beyond ideological stances to the disclosure of real interests
    - is a transformative interaction where ideas build on each other and emerge as new conceptualizations

The point of this book is to help educational leaders address issues of competing values and ethical principles within their school communities. In the next chapter, we provide a framework designed to assist educational leaders in their role as stewards of the process of democratic deliberation. We also propose a set of ethical principles to deepen the deliberation. Many leaders may do what we propose—or at least some of what we lay out here—intuitively. We believe that making the tacit more explicit will help make the process of policy deliberation more transparent and democratic, thereby allowing leaders at all levels to reevaluate their interactions with and conceptions of policy. Without a solid basis for making decisions about who gets what and when and why, one is operating without a moral compass.