Foreword

Principles. They are at the heart of the book you hold in your hands. Authors Richard Sagor and Deborah Rickey intersperse first-person accounts with insightful analyses and probing questions that collectively yield a fly-on-the-wall vantage point of leadership principles in action. In the pages that follow, I predict you will be as intrigued as I was by the way one superintendent, Dealous Cox, drew upon his personal experience as a Quaker, and upon the philosophy of the congregation of Friends, to lead the principled transformation of an entire school district.

Dea Cox grounded this transformation in what he called "the people strategy." Reminiscent of Jim Collins's *Good to Great* approach of putting the right people in the right seats while helping nonperformers get off the bus, Dea emphasized the importance of hiring only the best—not to be confused with the best available. And, he asked, why should we not hold out for the absolute best in the field—especially when we are talking about classroom teachers who hold our nation's future in their hands? According to Quaker philosophy, no one person has all the answers, but each person has a part of the answer. If we want to solve problems successfully and efficiently, it behooves us to draw input from those with the best preparation, the most extensive background, the finest ability to interact with others, and the qualities most likely to inspire trust and confidence. These are the people who should staff America's schools and these are the people Dea set out to hire, develop, and retain. Dea's background and his "people strategy" also prompted him to rely heavily on a process of continuing dialogue and reflection. Like many effective leaders, he discovered that it was more important to ask the right questions than to try to deliver the right answers. He trusted his collective staff to work together, share ideas, and arrive at viable solutions.

I had the good fortune to meet Dea Cox in the 1980s, in the midst of his tenure at West Linn. One of my professional friends, Dick Sagor, was an administrator in that district and he invited me to visit and share some thoughts about best practices for educating students in the principles of social responsibility. I was privately amused to discover that my colleague, a stereotypically hyper-energetic New Yorker, was now enthusiastically reporting to one of the most quiet and thoughtful leaders I had ever met. It was more than a case of opposites attract. True to his people strategy, Dea had hired Dick because he was the best possible person to serve as the high school's principal. Dea was neither offended nor threatened by someone whose personal style was so dissimilar from his own. He knew that it wasn't style that mattered most in a leader, it was principles—and in Dick, those were rock solid. As time went on, Dick rose to the position of assistant superintendent of West Linn and later became a university professor focusing on the very action research that was a key component of Dea's approach to professional growth.

Over the past 19 years, my own journey as a school superintendent has wended its way among three school districts with widely divergent student populations. Yet, as my path wound across the nation from the East Coast to the Midwest to the West Coast, I witnessed some amazing similarities among the staffs of those districts. Along with Dea Cox, I believe that students, teachers, and administrators form a community and that we become wiser, stronger, better human beings by freely sharing our struggles and our achievements with each other. I believe that leaders are made, not born, and that each of us can develop the power to transform others if we are first willing to transform ourselves. As the chapters of this book unfold, I suspect you will find yourself smiling, nodding, and occasionally raising an eyebrow at Dea's approach to leadership. And he would approve of the last, for he continually exhorted his teachers and principals to "dispute the passage"; that is, to challenge the status quo. That style of leadership demands several qualities, including confidence in one's own abilities, trust in the skills and motives of others, and a willingness to follow wherever the data leads. Although you may not agree with some of the decisions Dea made in the situations Sagor and Rickey describe (and I find myself puzzled by some of these as well), the lesson in leadership is not the specific resolution but the thoughtful principles that were deeply embedded within his approach to leadership.

The school reform movement, which began with such high hopes in the early 1990s, has steadily devolved into a politicized boxing match, replete with sucker punches that leave most contenders bloodied, going down for the count, and added to the growing list of schools labeled as “failing.” I concur with Sagor and Rickey that reform, to be lasting and effective, must be grounded in something—and that something is democratic leadership principles. Further, the key to improving schools does not lie in silver-bullet programs and curriculum—it rests in people. Like Dea Cox, we must invest in people—especially teachers and principals. We must recognize and accept teachers as partners, not adversaries; we must work hand-in-hand with teacher unions to achieve common goals. For example, in one of my districts, we negotiated a memorandum of agreement with the teachers union to set aside seniority clauses and enable struggling schools to have the first pick of teacher candidates. We also established a data room in every high school and formed teams of teachers who conducted action research in order to improve student outcomes. In another example of democratic leadership, we involved principals in the process of supporting their peers by having them visit each other’s schools, observe the instructional process, and offer candid feedback for the administrator’s own professional growth.

This ongoing emphasis on collaborative practice—in which school-based educators were engaged in reflective examination, action research, and dialogue on our everyday classroom practices—echoes Dea’s work on creating a climate of professional growth. West Linn’s annual “Celebration of Inquiry” clearly encouraged the collective search for better teacher performance, the continuing focus on professional growth, and the collaborative nature of that growth that are core to an investing-in-people improvement strategy. Over time, such methods and activities became core to West Linn’s culture and operation, creating a professional climate that promoted excellence. However, honesty compels me to warn you that effecting culture shifts among independent-thinking adults is not always simple or linear. To the contrary—because it involves confronting the hard questions, the assumed truths, and the tradition of practice—it is often uncomfortable and arduous. Nevertheless, I have seen the beneficial impact of that strategy in the districts I have had the good fortune to lead.

Recently, the Eugene (OR) Public Schools convened groups called Learning about Learning Networks. Each of these administrator/teacher groups focused on a problem of practice, visited classrooms to better understand the problem and the current approaches to addressing the problem, and then met to assess what they saw and to think through how they could best address this problem from a new perspective. In one school the problem posed was one of student engagement in learning. The team of teachers and administrators observed classes and interviewed students to assess the degree to which students were engaged. Team members initially reported having heard positive reports from students about their engagement. However, as they reflected more deeply on what some students had shared, they realized that this group of students had merely mastered a traditional model of "doing school"—listening, taking notes, occasionally asking questions, and dutifully learning the material placed in front of them. They were neither used to nor comfortable with active engagement in critical thinking and problem solving. Another network chose to examine the degree to which teaching elicited higher-order questions from students. The observation revealed not only limited higher-order questions, but limited questioning in general. As a result, the teachers at the school formulated direct ways to teach students what higher order questions are and then challenged them to pose such questions in assignments and discussions. There are many exceptional teachers applying powerful teaching practices in Eugene; these two examples illustrate the staff's openness to self-examination and self-reflection, and their ability to not simply look at what is positive but to examine basic assumptions and challenge themselves to improve. Eugene's teachers exhibit the mettle—similar to the courage Dea inspired through his leadership—to continuously pursue a quest to improve professional practice and student outcomes.

These examples indicate that even as teachers are striving to provide excellent instruction, all classroom practices can be improved when placed under the collegial microscope of examination, reflection, and dialogue. Sagor and Rickey show how West Linn embedded reflection and dialogue into its professional growth model. More important, however, the principles they outline give us a direction for our own pursuit of deep and sustainable professional growth. With the help of Dea Cox as a model, the authors encourage us to question the "givens," be open to change, come to terms with uncertainty, and seek new solutions in a never-ending pursuit of excellence.

In contrast to the hunt for quick fixes so common among school reformers, Dea understood that schools are human organizations and that deep change takes time, persistence, and consistent effort. Creating an environment where continuous professional learning is the core organizational norm—and where excellence in reaching all students is an operational, not just a visionary, goal—is the only real path to long-term improvement in education. Sagor and Rickey weave Dea Cox's story of striving to create that culture, but they also offer a depth of insight into what they have learned as outstanding educators and educational leaders in their own right. Investing in people and in the collective capacity of a faculty is the essential means of improving education. We are a people profession. Schools are human organizations. Just as we support the continuous growth of all students, we must support a powerful learning environment for the dedicated professionals who work with those students. That is the lesson that is emerging from studies of the highest performing nations—and that is the lesson of West Linn as well.

In this book, Sagor and Rickey relay an engaging case study of one transformational leader and of the "shadow" he cast over an entire organization in his tireless quest to change schools. The authors' narrative demonstrates that transformational leaders—by their actions and by the shadows they cast over others—change not only organizations but also, going forward, the lives of people they will never have the opportunity to meet. I urge you to read this book, to reflect on its message, and then to go forward and cast your own shadow.

Sheldon H. Berman, EdD
Author, *Children's Social Consciousness*
and the Development of Social Responsibility
Superintendent of Schools
Eugene, Oregon