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Commentary on: "For Safety's Sake: A Case Study of School Security Efforts and Their Impact on Education Reform"

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Public schools in America have, in many ways, become the solution of choice for many, if not all, of our social ills. Indeed, it almost seems that, for every social ill, we design a program for schools to implement to solve it. If children need to be vaccinated, fed, clothed, provided health care, body mass index calculated, etc., we can count on somebody to develop a “program” to address that social ill and for our state legislators to mandate its application in schools.

On one reading, this seems more than reasonable. After all, where better to provide health and other public services to children than in the institution where they are required to be? Moreover, schools cannot carry out their primary mission—educating America’s youth—if those youth are hungry, sick or “acting out.”

And yet, this approach may be an example of what H.L. Menken means when he is famously quoted as saying, “There is always an easy solution to every human problem—neat, plausible, and wrong.”¹

Indeed, there are more than a few problems with using public schools as the preferred solution-space for these and other social ills, two of which bear repeating in the current context. First, adding those activities to the work of public schools can divert resources—fiscal, programmatic, and human and social capital—from the mission of schools. Second, and equally important, framing those issues as technical problems to be solved rather than as adaptive issues to be worked through reduces the likelihood that we will successfully address them.

The distinction between technical problems and adaptive issues is well worth exploring. A technical problem, such as a broken arm or crashed computer, is one that has a clear solution: setting the bone and putting it in a cast, for example. Human problems are rarely technical. They are more likely to have multiple sources and require expertise from a variety of fields to address, from experts who adapt their knowledge to the specific context and circumstances.¹ Adaptive leadership recognizes that “one size” never fits all.

Garver and Noguera have provided us with an insightful and useful case study of what can happen when administrators respond to a crisis situation—in their case, “violent conflicts between Asian and Black students,” in predictable ways: in an effort to improve student safety, the district spends precious resources to dramatically improve security measures—more security cameras, increased police presence, stricter

¹ It is important to note that all actors in human situations have a kind of expertise. In Seacrest, students and community members had expertise that could ultimately prove essential in addressing the issue behind the specific behavior problem.

discipline policies.ⁱⁱ That these measures have an almost immediate positive effect seems, in one view, to support the decision to focus on security and to justify the expenditures.

And yet, as Garver and Noguera demonstrate, that success comes at some rather significant costs—fewer resources to support the instructional program and professional development, and dramatically reduced emphasis on other aspects of education (e.g., content knowledge, critical thinking and moral reasoning, social-emotional support for students, etc.). Among the educational and social consequences of this dramatically-increased policy and practice focus on security is less emphasis on learning and on school climate.

One could argue that the phenomena Garver and Noguera document in their case is a direct consequence of the way the violent incidents were framed by all of the actors: district administration, the media, and some, if not all, factions in the community. Framing the incidents as discipline or behavior problems is an example of one kind of mistake managers (and leaders) typically make when they name or frame problems.² In this case, the mistake is framing the issue/problem/challenge in terms of preferred solutions. The moment the problem was defined as a discipline or behavior problem, the solution of stricter discipline policies and more rigid enforcement is almost inevitable.

Jentz and Murphy³ argue that it's natural for leaders to respond to "Oh, no!" moments—and make no mistake that violent incidents such as those in the Gaver and Noguera article are "Oh,no!" moments—by imposing preferred solutions. At such times we expect, and almost demand, the imposition of a solution, if only to contain the situation and create some safety amidst the confusion, restore calm and, perhaps, build confidence.

In this sense, responding with increased security and closer enforcement of district policies and behavior code was a necessary first step. But using discipline/behavior as the primary (or only) framing treats a wicked problem as if it were a tame one,⁴ resulting in applying technical managerial solutions when adaptive leadership^{5,6} is required.

A richer framing of the situation would have gone beyond a singular focus on student behavior, and might have had the following characteristics: clarifying multiple sources of the problem, pointing to

ⁱⁱ Garver and Noguera seem to use "security" and "safety" interchangeably. Whether the two are interchangeable might well be worth investigating. Not all things that increase my security increase my sense of being safe. Indeed, increasing security measures such as more sensitive metal detectors and an increased police presence might actually make people feel less safe. But that's a discussion for another time.

multiple potential outcomes, allowing for multiple approaches to solutions, making sense to people with different perspectives and identifying the kinds of information that might be helpful in developing solutions. For example, a rich, multifaceted framing of the “problem” at Seacrest would have included reference to classroom instructional methods, school cultures, the separation of different ethnic groups and not just “student behavior” or “discipline.” In this way, the framing might have made more sense to students, teachers, parents and community members. It would also have pointed to the need to collect additional data about those facets of the issue and lead to developing a multifaceted strategy for addressing the issues.

Developing a framing with such characteristics would require a different kind of leadership than Garver and Noguera imply was provided in the case they describe. Heifetz and Sinder refer to this as adaptive leadership, which would require bringing stakeholders together to reframe the issue and developing ways of addressing the issue that would engage all stakeholders as part of the solution space.

Jentz and Murphy and Yankelovich provide two models for this work. Jentz and Murphy³ propose what they call Reflective Inquiry and Action (RIA). RIA has five steps and enables leaders to pursue their goals, values and judgments while enlisting others to help them make sense of difficult situations. Indeed, the key guiding principles behind RIA—embracing your confusion, structuring a process for moving forward, and listening reflectively—are ways of maintaining authority while exercising adaptive leadership.

While the RIA process is designed primarily for what they call “micro” work in private meetings between individuals and small groups, they also provide an instructive case application to the daunting “macro” challenge of educating all children in every school.

Daniel Yankelovich^{7,8} outlines what he calls “the public learning” model, which moves from awareness and a sense of urgency to working through the variety of choices for action, to resolution which involves sustainable public judgment. The key to Yankelovich’s public learning model is the middle, or “working through” stage, in which leaders convene diverse stakeholders for deliberative problem identification, including identifying alternative definitions of the problem, and identifying different solutions. This includes explicitly identifying the values at play in different interpretations of the issues and solutions and then working through the tensions and the trade-offs people are and are not willing to make to reach sustainable judgment.

Like the RIA model, this requires interactive leadership and engaging a wide range of stakeholders to work together, bringing the public's wisdom to add value to that of "...experts to struggle together with conflicting values and priorities to arrive at a public judgment of how they will work together to address the problem at hand."

Interestingly, using either the RIA or "public learning" model could have created a richer framing of what the administrators at Seacrest High School, or the central administration of the city within which it resides, called a "security" problem. It could well have involved a broad range of stakeholders in looking at that "security" and "safety" in a broader context—including the context of teaching and learning, the culture of the school, and the relationship of the school with the communities it serves. It would have broadened the conversation in ways that could have led to the sustainable school improvement Garver and Noguera argue was ignored in the actual case.

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