

The Role of Management and Diversity in Improving Performance of Disadvantaged

Students: An Application of Bum Phillips' Don Shula Rule

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I would like to thank the faculty of the public administration program for inviting me to Wayne State to deliver the Lent Upson lecture, especially for suggesting that I talk about the research that I have done linking public administration to the performance of disadvantaged students. Public administration is a science of the artificial (Simon 1969). Although knowledge for the sake of knowledge is important, we should always be aware that we care as much about how things might be as how they actually are. That philosophy undergirds my research agenda.

This lecture has two key themes. First, management matters; we now have a systematic body of evidence that demonstrates what managers, especially superintendents, do shapes the performance of school districts. What effective school superintendents do, in turn, is very similar to what effective managers do in other public organizations. The ability of managers to improve educational outcomes, in widely different types of school districts with widely varying curricula, is the reason for the lecture's subtitle. According to former Houston Oiler Coach Bum Phillips, the problem with coaching against Don Shula was that "he can take his'n and beat your'n, and then take your'n and beat his'n." Just as the quality of coaching is the key variable in Bum Phillips' mind, the quality of management is a key variable in the performance of all public organizations, including public school districts.

Second, representative bureaucracy, the idea that bureaucracies should look like the people that they serve, also makes a difference. Some systematic research has demonstrated that under certain conditions representative bureaucracies are more effective than bureaucracies that do not mirror the population. In the particular case in question, there is no doubt that the performance of minority students improves in schools with more minority faculty.

These two themes are without question out of step with the mainstream in education policy. Much of education policy seeks a magic bullet, the one program that will miraculously solve all education problems. Many scholars and pundits offer such magic bullets—back to basics, school choice, Afrocentric Curriculum, etc. etc. These reforms offer a simple solution to

the problems of education, adopt my magic bullet and the dragons of poor performance will be vanquished. I consider this approach to education reform both misguided and something that contributes to the problems that we face (Hess 1999).

How We Got Started on this Research Agenda

I confess, I too once sought magic bullets. About 7 years ago, the Spencer Foundation awarded me a grant to examine the college aspirations of Latino students. I approached this problem the way I approached other public policies that I have studied. I started by gathering masses of data and subjecting them to extensive statistical analysis. In this case, I built a series of what are called “education production functions” to relate the resources that schools have and the constraints that they face to whether or not Latino students attend college. After building these regression equations, I then selected those school district that outperformed the regression equation, that is, those with the largest positive residuals. My intent was to do site visits and prepare a list of “best practices” (Bretschneider, et al. 2005; Meier and Gill 2000). I then made a major mistake, I decided to check on the validity of these best practices by arranging site visits with some of the worst schools and school districts.

The site visits were interesting and informative, but we soon noticed a pattern. To illustrate, at one of the best school districts in the state, the director of curriculum attributed their success to the adoption of the block schedule, the change from 50 minute class periods to 75 minute class periods. This change, he felt, really let the teachers teach. They could combine lectures with experimentation with student participation, and they gained some real synergies in the process. Here was a magic bullet—the block schedule. At one of the worst school districts in the state, when asked what the largest obstacle to generating more college-bound students was, the superintendent immediately responded, the block schedule. He stated bluntly that the adoption of the block schedule was a disaster. Teachers did not alter their teaching styles, educational objectives were not met, and they were abandoning the change.

The block schedule illustration was repeated several times in our site visits. Both good and bad schools were using the same programs yet getting dramatically different results. At the same time, the PhD student conducting the site visits concluded that one could tell just walking through a school, particularly between classes, whether the school was a good one or a bad one. Good schools had the faculty and administrators out in the hallways interacting with students (particularly those students who did not want to interact with administrators and faculty). These human differences were also correlated with environmental differences in terms of the appearance of the school and grounds. We were forced to conclude that maybe the solution to the higher education achievement of Latino students was not programs but people.

What Are the Characteristics of Effective School Districts

The Latino college aspirations study is just one of several that we have done using similar techniques (Doerfler 2004; <http://perg.tamu.edu>). Our qualitative evidence is fairly consistent

about the attributes shared by effective schools and school districts. They are characterized by the following:

1. *Long term stable leadership.* The superintendent has either been in the position a long period of time or was hired from within.
2. The school or district has *high academic standards*, and applies of those standards to everyone regardless of background or disadvantage. One superintendent went so far as to sit in on every teacher interview to make sure that teachers shared his philosophy that all students had to be challenged and that all could succeed. This superintendent simply refused to accept the excuse that student x does very well given x's disadvantaged background.
3. *Stable curriculum.* Good districts and good schools have a set curriculum and stick with it; they do not chase educational fads. Teachers need to know what will be taught from one year to next and who is teaching what. Most interesting, it does not appear to matter what the curriculum is, only that it is kept stable. As an illustration, one of the most successful districts in Texas for educating Latino students has an extensive bilingual program and in fact requires students to be bilingual to receive a high school diploma. Another highly successful district with Latino students uses a rapid transition, English as a second language program that moves students into an English-speaking instructional environment very quickly. These are radically different programs, but they get similar results. The programs, however, are both long-term, adequately resourced, and have the commitment of teachers and administrators.
4. *Hard work.* The commitment of teachers and administrators in good schools is readily apparent to anyone visiting these schools. Without magic bullets, educational performance does not come easy. It takes concerted effort of teachers, administrators, and students.
5. *Parental involvement.* Education is coproduced good. High levels of parental involvement are necessary to extend the school-based learning to the rest of the student's environment. One South Texas school district with almost all of its students eligible for free school lunch and well over half the students first generation Americans operates parent sessions that discuss the expectations for students (home work, when tests will be administered, the availability of financial aid) as well as public health and other important issues. These parent sessions average over 90% attendance.

Much of what we found in these statistical analyses and the follow-up case studies is really traditional public administration, things that we have been teaching for decades. Chester Barnard (1938) advised us to set clear goals and seek to get employees to share your vision of the organization. Successful organizations rely on the commitment and values of the members not just incentives.

The practical findings on education policy have gone hand in hand with a scholarly research agenda seeking knowledge about organizations. That research agenda is based on quantitative analysis with large data sets, seeks to train PhDs who will teach in schools of public affairs, and seeks to build better theories about public organizations and how they can be managed.

I'd like to chat about some of that research. The research is based on primarily, although not exclusively, on Texas school districts. All findings discussed here are from large production functions that control for composition of student body, resources, constraints, etc. They also control for how well the organization did last year, that is, an organization gets no credit unless it did better than last year. These findings have all undergone the traditional peer review process and have been published in a variety of professional journals. Owing to the stakes involved in making policy prescriptions, only work that has passed the rigors of the peer review process should be used as a guide to change policy or implementation.

The Importance of Management

Networking is an essential function of school superintendents (Meier and O'Toole 2001; 2003). By interacting with other superintendents, local business leaders, parental groups, state legislators and others, superintendents do two things. They pick up of valuable information in regard to practices of other successful organizations, and they build support for the organization in its environment. In the latter case superintendents essentially handle the political flack and keep it from detrimentally affecting the schools. In short, effective networking allows teachers to concentrate on teaching.

Networking behavior of the superintendent is associated with as much as a 4-5% improvement in the standardized tests used to evaluate Texas schools. This estimate has remained consistent over a data set that now ranges from 1995 to 2005. The impact of networking, while it has some distributional consequences (see O'Toole and Meier 2004), also contributes to a wide variety of other performance indicators.

Superintendents also improve the performance of schools by making good decisions. Let me provide four illustrations. Some school superintendents vertically integrate their curriculum to create higher student aspirations and effective instruction. In such schools, third grade students calculating the area of a triangle are told that this will eventually become geometry and will be part of the calculus class that the student will take in high school. Some superintendents overcome the resource limits on gifted programs by using the Advanced Placement program as an honors program that is open to all students. By getting college credits for students while still in high school, many students and parents are convinced that college is a viable option for them. Other superintendents focus their discretionary resources, particularly those from compensatory education, in the first three grades; in one case with an effective 10 to 1 student-teacher ratio in grades K-3. The philosophy is that problems can be fixed early while they are still small. Another major urban district keys on attendance. Any student absent receives a house visit from

a staff member the day of the absence to verify the absence and get parental involvement if truancy is involved. Once per semester truant officers collaborate with local law enforcement officers and stop all children of school age who are not in school to check why not. These contacts again get linked back to parents.

We measure the quality of decisions of managers or the quality of the manager with an unusual measure (Meier and O'Toole 2002). We examine management salaries and use all the factors that should predict salary (district size, budgets, human capital, past district performance, etc.). The residual, we contend, contains a judgement by school boards in regard to the quality of superintendent. Because the market for superintendents has many characteristics of a competitive labor market, we have substantial confidence that it taps, in part, quality. This quality measure is consistently related to a wide variety of organizational performance measures from attendance, to test scores, to indicators of college aspirations. The measure can add as much as 4-5% to total organizational performance and does so consistently over time.

Superintendents also improve the quality of schools through the normal processes of human resources management. Productive organizations require stable, motivated, and talented workers; and schools are no exception to this rule. The human resources management skills of the superintendent show up in the turnover statistics of the organization. Conventional wisdom holds that it takes three to five years on the job to learn to be an effective teacher. High turnover rates not only rob of the organization of needed personnel skills and knowledge about the operating systems of the organization, but they also impose large transactions costs as administrators must shift their time to recruitment of new personnel rather than other pressing organizational needs. Teacher stability (or in effect 1 minus the turnover proportion), our measure of effective human resources management, is positively associated with a wide range of education performance measures and contributes as much as 5-6% of the organizations overall performance (O'Toole and Meier 2003).

Stable leadership provides numerous benefits to the organization. Some have been noted above; stable leadership generates stable curricula and the ability to invest long term in improving the organization. Stable leadership also contributes to the expertise of the organization because an experienced manager is more likely to know the strengths and weaknesses in the organization and how one might take advantage of the former and avoid the latter. Our measure of stable leadership is how long the superintendent has been in the organization in any capacity, thus it taps familiarity with the organization as well as experience in the top role. While our analysis shows that long-term poor leadership can have detrimental effects, in general stability in the top role in the organization is positively associated with measures of performance on standardized tests. The impacts of stability, both managerial and teacher, show up in stronger terms for disadvantaged students (O'Toole and Meier 2003). For example, the impact of managerial stability on test scores is three times as high for low income students (those on reduced or free school lunch) as it is for all students. Stability appears to be a major advantage in influencing the life's chances of students who themselves do not have particularly stable lives. Organizations in this manner substitute for other institutions in the

student's environment. Despite all the criticism of bureaucracies as slow to change, sometimes stability has great value in dealing with public problems.

The Importance of Representative Bureaucracy

The first theme of this lecture, then, is that management matters and it matters in many of the ways that public administration scholars have long advocated. The second major thrust of our research agenda has been in the area of representative bureaucracy, the relationship between the diversity of organization members and the benefits to individual clientele.

The basic idea of representative bureaucracy is relatively simple. A bureaucracy that looks like the population is likely to make decisions that generally benefit that population. Representative bureaucracy appears to be a research topic that I have been drawn to multiple times over a 30 year period. My work has examined all federal agencies, the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission, and police departments, but the overwhelming majority of the work has been on schools and school districts.

Why might a black teacher benefit a black student or Latino teacher a Latino student? What in the language of Lynn, Heinrich and Hill (2001) is the "causal linkage." There are four distinct ways that a coethnic teacher might influence the performance of students (Meier et al. 2001). First, a literature in education holds that learning styles vary across students of different races and that minority teachers are more likely to recognize these differences and teach accordingly. The empirical work in this area can best be characterized as mixed, and we might consider this as a hypothesis rather than a confirmed causal process. Still our qualitative work indicates that teachers, including minority teachers, frequently intervene in students' lives and encourage them to raise their aspirations or change their behavior.

Second, black (and Latino) teachers are less likely to make decisions that have major negative ramifications for black (and Latino) students and more likely to make decisions that have positive implications. In school districts with more black/Latino teachers, black/Latino students are less likely to be assigned to special education classes, less likely to be assigned to a nonacademic track, less likely to be disproportionately disciplined (suspended, expelled, etc.), and more likely to gain access to gifted and challenging classes. The role that minority teachers play in gaining minority students access to what some term equal educational opportunities, results in students better prepared to perform well (Meier and Stewart 1991; Meier, England and Stewart 1989).

Third, minority teachers might have a salutary effect on the behavior of their nonminority colleagues. Teaching is a helping profession, and one can perceive that teachers share information on how to teach disadvantaged children. In particular the problems of grouping, tracking, and discipline, because they are so institutionalized, might not be apparent as discriminatory to Anglo teachers who have no interaction with minority teachers. This impact might also extend to changes in expectations or changes in teaching styles. While such impacts

are not representative bureaucracy per se, they do fit what Selden (1997) refers to as a representational role.

Minority teachers can also affect the performance of minority students by simply being role models. Students identify with role models and change their behavior. This is not really part of representative bureaucracy at all because the teacher does not act for (that is, represent) the student in anything more than a symbolic manner. It is the behavior of the student that changes not anything that the teacher does. An example of symbolic representation changing client behavior can be found in our study of sexual assault and police forces. That study found that in cities with more women on the police force (as sworn officers), the reporting of sexual assaults increased significantly. Given the large percentage of sexual assaults that are not reported, the likely process is that women observe the gender composition of police forces, and when an assault occurs are more likely to report it because they feel that their case will be more likely to be treated seriously. This process can also explain why the same cities then generate higher arrest rates for sexual assaults (because the victims are more prompt in reporting, preserve important evidence, and testify in court; Meier and Nicholson-Crotty forthcoming).

Our research on representative bureaucracy uses the same elaborate production function controls including the lagged dependent variable as the management analysis. In addition, it controls for the performance of Anglo students so that for Latino teachers to influence Latino students (or black teachers to influence black students) they must improve performance over and above that for Anglo students and for the Latino students performance last year.

For Latino students, one can see a full set of results in the March/April 2006 *Public Administration Review* (Meier and O'Toole 2006). On the base standardized tests, a one standard deviation increase in the percentage of Latino teachers is associated with a reduction of one-sixth in the gap between Latino and Anglo test scores. This is a substantial impact. For African American students, the size of the coefficient is much larger, but the gap between Anglo and black test scores is also much larger. The relative size of the impact is approximately the same (Meier et al. forthcoming).

The 2006 *PAR* article shows the influence of Latino teachers is not limited to just the core standardized tests (the TAAS or the TAKS), but can be found in numerous other indicators of Latino student performance. Latino teachers are also associated with higher attendance rates for Latino students, greater access to advanced classes, greater access to Advanced Placement classes, an increased likelihood of taking the college boards, higher SAT scores, higher ACT scores, and more Latino students who score at the very top of the college board test ranges. Preliminary analysis for African-American students shows similar results.

The second theme of this lecture then is that bureaucratic representation matters. Latino students do better in schools and school districts with more Latino teachers, and African-American students do better in schools and school districts with more African-American teachers. Although we also have some evidence that minority teachers also benefit Anglo

students (see Meier et al. 2001), those findings have not been investigated with the same degree of thoroughness as the impacts on minority students.

Conclusion

When I look back over the findings of my research, I am struck by how much of what I am saying is traditional public administration. The management findings are things we teach our students on a daily basis and have been part of our core knowledge for several decades. Representation is also central to public administration. Academics since Norton Long (1952) have recognized the important representation role played by bureaucracy, and practitioners have been designing bureaucracies to actively represent since at least the creation of the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

There are two paths to education reform into the United States. We can continue to seek magic bullets, the perfect curriculum or the perfect set of incentives. I do not think that is going to work. Where this approach does work, it works in small groups and cannot be taken to the scale necessary to solve our educational problems.

Alternatively, we can integrate public administration into the education policy process. If we improve the quality of management in public education, we will improve the quality of our schools. If we improve the representativeness of our educational systems, particularly at the street level, we will achieve significant gains among disadvantaged students.

I suspect that there are other areas where public administration can contribute to both excellence and equity in our educational system. I have long been convinced that our school districts are simply too large to be governed. While I know many men and women who can effectively manage a school district of 10,000 students, I am not sure that there are many individuals with the talents necessary to manage a school district of 200,000 or even 100,000. The problems of large districts may be insurmountable at the current level of scale and the current level of available resources. The Houston Independent School District, for example, starts its school year with about 176,000 students, and its enrollment peaks in November at approximately 210,000 students. Think about the difficulties of educating 34,000 students who do not show up until after the school year is well underway. I think public administration can also make a contribution by educating politicians as well as bureaucrats. The irony of well-trained bureaucrats working for amateur politicians is self evident. What is not so evident is that both the political role and the bureaucrat role are vital to effective governance. Our own work shows that when political institutions fail to perform their role, that the influence of the bureaucracy becomes larger and more important (Meier and O'Toole 2004). But even though bureaucracies can and do perform political functions, such actions can only partially compensate for the ineptness of political institutions. Political institutions also need reformed for effective governance.

Compared to the magic bullet approach, my prescription for educational reform is not

easy, it's not fast, and it's not sexy. It won't mobilize voters or bring in large campaign contributions. It is, however, effective.

Thank you very much for listening.

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