



Orchestrating Change: Seeing the Big Picture in American Education

Our nation is at a critical crossroads. We recognize that the world we live in is rapidly changing, and although we cannot predict the future, we do seem to collectively understand that we must prepare our population for the challenges ahead. Good preparation, in other words, is perhaps our best leverage for meeting the new world head on.

This concern for the future has sparked a renewed emphasis on education by the Obama administration and other thought leaders, as evidenced by the largest ever investment in education in the history of our country.

At times like these, when the public conversation inevitably turns to the question of “who is responsible?” it is vitally important to remember that no single actor is accountable for educating our nation’s young people. Like an orchestra, all of the players—principals, administrators, business and community leaders, students, families, school boards, taxpayers, and teachers—have distinct roles to play. And, like an orchestra, the educational system works best when each player is skilled, and when all the instruments are well tuned and playing in harmony. In other words, teachers can do their best work only when they are supported by a strong principal, who builds a healthy school culture and offers access to curricular resources, mentoring, and common planning time. The principal, in turn, can only do her best work when she is supported by a strong administration, which, in turn, must be supported by all of the stakeholders in the community at large. Like an orchestra, a school system is a highly complex organism in need of constant tuning.

This is especially important to remember, as the media seems to be placing classroom teachers under a rather ungenerous microscope in recent weeks.

But Susan Moore Johnson, the Jerome T. Murphy Professor of Education at Harvard Graduate School of Education and Director of the Project on the Next Generation of Teachers, urges us to understand the school as a learning organization for everyone and recommends for teachers what she calls a “differentiated career.” Such a scenario places teachers with the deepest experience, content knowledge, and set of skills and competencies in leadership positions, where they become instructional coaches or consulting teachers to those who are less experienced and knowledgeable. Additionally,

teachers with specialized knowledge in such areas as technology or data assessment can be offered new roles that contribute to the functioning of the larger system, not just their individual classrooms or schools. “If schools are not organized to rely on the strengths of some to improve the performance of others, little will change and students’ opportunity to learn will continue to be determined by the luck of the draw when classroom assignments are made.”

Clearly, it is the responsibility of administrators and a wide range of community stakeholders to make possible such remodeling of the educational system.

Fortunately, according to Johnson, today’s new teachers *want* to work collaboratively with their colleagues, and many see themselves extending their influence beyond the classroom over the course of a life-long career in education.

This is good news for everyone in the orchestra and for the very future of our nation.

(530 words)