



Don't Let Tough Times Go to Waste

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Follow up Learning

Based on working with CASS members during Professional Learning conferences (2017-2019)



Alberta superintendents and their teams have come a long way. The first time I visited the province, about three years ago, the superintendent leadership quality standard (SQLS) seemed like an abstract and fuzzy idea, far removed from their minds, hearts and hands. Now it has come to life in their everyday leadership practice. Throughout the Fall 2019 conference I heard compelling stories of how superintendents and their teams are bringing the SQLS to life in their school authorities. The stories came both from district leaders themselves, and from the research team that has been tracking down the implementation of SQLS. There's still work to do, but the sense of momentum and progress was palpable in every session I attended.

The not so good news are the tough times that lie ahead for the province, as signaled by the cuts in education funding announced some weeks ago. In tough times we face the choice between simply getting through or placing a more determined focus on what matters most and bring out the best in us. As defined by Marshall Ganz (2009), Leadership is “accepting responsibility to help others achieve shared purpose under conditions of uncertainty” (p.18) These tough times will put the leadership of superintendents and their teams to the test. And yet I have strong confidence in the strength of their moral purpose and the caliber of their strategic capacity to lead their schools to liberate learning (Rincón-Gallardo, 2019). Throughout the conference, the dominant tone I heard was not one of defeat and resignation, but one of purpose and agency: how do we turn *what we have* into *what we need* to get *what we want*? I saw strategy development in action. When conventional resources are scarce, *resourcefulness* is key.

These are times of leading with and mobilizing the heads, hearts, and hands of all those involved in educating the children and youth of Alberta. The head refers to developing good strategy (turning what we have into what we need to get what we want). Developing strong strategic capacity involves nurturing and leveraging the motivation of people across the organization to liberate learning, finding effective ways to gain access to salient knowledge, and developing venues for continuous and collective learning (what is working, what isn't, what shall we do differently?) (Ganz, 2010).

The hearts are engaged through story, through public narrative. And public narrative is the combination of three stories: the story of self (who am I and what drives me to do the work I do? What key challenges, choices and outcomes have shaped who I am and what I do?); the story of us (what is common between my story and that of those I lead? What challenges have we faced before that made us stronger, or smarter?); and the story of now (what is the urgent action we need to take now? What would happen if we don't?). (Ganz, 2009) During tough times, public narrative is especially important, as it allows people in an organization to see what their leaders are about, to connect emotionally to their leaders and each other, and to find hope and courage to act in the face of uncertainty.

I have been impressed with the caliber and integrity of district leaders in Alberta, and trust they will leverage the challenging times to bring out the best in them and zero in on powerful learning. Don't let these tough times go to waste! May these days be remembered as the beginning of your journey to becoming "even better" and continuing to serve Alberta teachers, school leaders and students.

References

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