

The Contexts of Schooling

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A Problem Based Learning Activity About The Political, Social, and Economic Contexts of Schooling

Introduction

In this problem based learning activity, the student will assume the role of principal who has been selected to lead a poorly performing (as measured by state standards) high school. As one might expect, the assignment is to create conditions in the school so that student performance can begin improving and reach state standards of performance. The student will need to do so taking into account the dynamics created by the political, social and economic contexts within which schooling functions.

Student will be expected to engage in discussions as well as prepare a document (which will be scored in reference to Standard 6 of the ISLLC standards). A scoring guide provides criteria for assigning a value to the appropriate parts of the written product.

Standard 6

A school administrator is an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context.

Key knowledge and performance concepts

- Knowledge --The administrator has knowledge and understanding of:
 - principles of representative governance that under gird the system of American schools
 - the role of public education in developing and renewing a democratic society and an economically productive nation
 - the law as related to education and schooling
 - the political, social, cultural and economic systems and processes that impact schools
 - models and strategies of change and conflict resolution as applied to the larger political, social, cultural and economic contexts of schooling
 - global issues and forces affecting teaching and learning
 - the dynamics of policy development and advocacy under our democratic political system
 - the importance of diversity and equity in a democratic society
- Disposition --The administrator believes in, values, and is committed to:
 - education as a key to opportunity and social mobility
 - recognizing a variety of ideas, values, and cultures
 - importance of a continuing dialogue with other decision makers affecting education
 - actively participating in the political and policy-making context in the service of education
 - using legal systems to protect student rights and improve student opportunities
- Performances -- The administrator facilitates processes and engages in activities ensuring that:

- the environment in which schools operate is influenced on behalf of students and their families
- communication occurs among the school community concerning trends, issues, and potential changes in the environment in which schools operate
- there is ongoing dialogue with representatives of diverse community groups
- the school community works within the framework of policies, laws, and regulations enacted by local, state, and federal authorities
- public policy is shaped to provide quality education for students
- lines of communication are developed with decision makers outside the school community

Welcome!! Feel free to start whenever you are ready.

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The Scenario: The Contexts of Schooling

High Stakes

(Read the following case study and complete the assignments that follow.)

Jake Finbough hung up the telephone. He had just been informed by the Hinsdale Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Craig Pietz, that the school board had approved the superintendent's recommendation to appoint Mr. Jake Finbough to the position of principal at Fairview High School and that a contract would be forthcoming in the mail if Jake were willing to accept the position. Jake informed Dr. Pietz that he would be pleased to accept the appointment.

Fairview High School was a school in great need of strong and effective leadership. Following each of the past two school years, the state department of education had notified the Hinsdale Public Schools that high school students were seriously deficient in performance on the annual state-wide academic assessments. Furthermore, the state department of education warned that should the deficient performance continue for a third year, the high school would be placed on probation, and should the deficient performance continue for a fourth year, the state would assign an oversight team to the school district with powers of primary decision making to improve student academic achievement at Fairview High School.

The Hinsdale Board of Education and Superintendent of Schools decided to take some steps to reorganize personnel and establish clear accountability for student achievement at the high school. The current high school principal was reassigned to supervise maintenance and transportation for the school district, thereby vacating an essential leadership position for recruiting the leadership needed. A site council was organized with nominations for membership made by the superintendent to the school board and approval of membership made by the school board. Members were to be nominated based on their strong interests in improving academic achievement. Data were to be collected so that the performance of individual students could be tracked to the teachers who were teaching them. Teachers and administrators were to be held accountable for improving student achievement by a significant amount during the current school year. Because funding was not plentiful, the school district was to recruit immediate partnerships with community groups and individuals to acquire additional fiscal and human resources for the sole purpose of improving student achievement. Additionally, 50% of the funding for student activities was to be reallocated to resources that would have a direct influence on improving academic achievement.

Jake Finbough had done his homework. Initially, he knew about Hinsdale students' athletic achievements, including a number of years of state-level appearance in several athletic activities and domination in all sports in the athletic conference. He also knew about (1) the poor student achievement scores, (2) the limited economic base including a high number of students eligible for free and reduced school meals and other demographics of the community, (3) where, reportedly, the political powers were, (4) the characteristics of his staff, and (5) other descriptors and

information that are useful to understanding the position and expectations for which he was applying. He was aware of the rather dire consequences the high school staff faced related to the limited time in which student achievement had to improve significantly, based on scores earned on state-wide assessments. However, he had been recognized in the past as a teacher who was quite skillful in improving the school success of all students in his classes and as an administrator who worked purposefully and with instructional expertise with teachers. The fit seemed to be good, and this was an opportunity for Jake to further his reputation, particularly as a skillful and knowledgeable leader.

Jake Finbough arrived on the job July 1st. He began by requesting several meetings with the superintendent and central office administration to identify their expectations for his job performance. Basically, he was going to have to be a strong and effective change agent.

With the information he gained from those meetings, he went to work. Before school began, he constructed his communications to and planned activities for both the internal and external community. He established the year's agendas for the site council. He met with parent groups and student leaders, as well as with those in the community whose names surfaced as "people you'll have to deal with." He gained information suggesting that a number of factions existed in the community and that there were contrary opinions about the high school, except in the area of athletic competition.

During the beginning-of-school meeting with his faculty and support staff, Mr. Finbough presented the task ahead, how it would have to be accomplished, why the path he was suggesting was essential, and the support that he would be providing to assist in meeting district and state expectations. He told his staff that improving student achievement, as measured on the state-wide assessments, would be their most important priority. He also indicated that there were some instructional needs that everyone would have to "work on" to help students gain the knowledge and skill necessary to perform well on the assessments. He assured faculty and support staff that he would be there to support them in this process. Following this meeting, department leaders asked for a meeting with him to respond to what he had said.

In their meeting with Mr. Finbough, department leaders expressed the following concerns:

- The achievement scores of students at the high school was not a commonly known or understood fact among students, their parents, and the community.
- In fact, the community believed that they had excellent schools and so did the teachers. Consequently, Mr. Finbough's message was disconcerting and was causing morale problems.
- In reality, the high school students are not motivated and although their parents turn out in droves to support the students' athletic endeavors, they do not support the academic part of the educational program as well as they do athletics.
- To place such emphasis on student accountability, teacher accountability, and administrator accountability would make this a public issue and a negative reaction or "backlash" would likely occur toward his leadership.
- The high school faculty had not been provided the necessary resources to motivate students academically in the ways the state is assessing.

- Departments are unwilling to give up their locally adopted curricula and teach only to the skills assessed in the state assessments. Many teachers and other experts were involved in developing and implementing the local curriculum.
- To generate additional resources through local individual and group partnerships would be problematic, primarily because there are insufficient funds in this blue-collar community, but also because the partners who are not professional educators will expect to become involved in decision making about how their funds are spent. They also will raise questions about school district budgeting and local tax dollar use.

Mr. Finbough listened, took notes, and informed the department leaders that he would certainly consider their information and would be sure to involve them in further decision making. He also indicated that he would need to think upon their information and get back with them at some point in the near future.

The following day, Jake Finbough met with the superintendent to discuss the information provided by his department team leaders. At that meeting, the superintendent decided to provide insight to the problems the district has faced in trying to gain improved student achievement. The following observations were reported:

1. Strong county-wide athletic programs have existed for many decades for children and adults. The community has established large and varied athletic programs that now experience predictable success in competition, regardless of age of competitors, and that have total community support. The school district has benefited from those programs in their competitive athletic programs, becoming recognized as a state-wide contender in nearly every athletic activity.
2. Teachers are aware of the higher state standards that students must meet but are strongly resistant to changing either the curriculum or the instructional delivery that are required to improve student achievement related to state-wide assessments on the standards. Previously, they took a stand against participating in professional development that was related to aligning the curriculum and implementing "best practices" in instruction because it was viewed as too time constraining and unnecessary. They have been quite verbal in the community about the successes of Fairview students based on their overall grade point averages, which they consider good indicators of college success, and their achievements in extra-curricular activities. The school board had expressed concern about staff resistance to what the school board perceived as "doing the job they were employed for."
3. Approximately 85% of the high school staff coach in at least one sport. Some of those coaches are successful teachers as well as coaches; some are only successful coaches. Mr. Finbough should check the performance evaluations on file for his staff.
4. The school board is well aware of the standards. In fact, they invited Senator Whitehall to attend a board meeting and discuss the legislature's rationale for developing the standards and imposing change on school districts. Our legislative representatives are united behind this standards movement. In response to Senator Whitehall, board members indicated that they understood the need to be more academically competitive with other states and other nations, but they were somewhat reticent about the mandated changes and the public nature of reporting assessment results.

5. The school district has been experiencing a decline in revenue the past three years. It has been a small decline each year, but the decline certainly has affected resources available to the instructional programs.
6. Our community does believe that we have excellent schools. They have believed that for a long time. As achievement data becomes increasingly public, though, the school board and administration are going to be on the "hot spot" to explain. That will challenge us.
7. There is some suspicion that grade inflation is causing a problem for our students' post-high school success. That is, nearly all our minority students, in particular, and also a noticeable number of our Caucasian students tend to have challenges keeping their jobs and/or completing post-secondary school studies. Follow-up studies and interviews suggest that they don't feel they have the skills to maintain employment or status as a student.

Dr. Pietz assured Mr. Finbough that he would do all he could to support the change efforts at the high school and that Mr. Finbough simply needed to be alert to and careful with the political, social, economic, and cultural implications of decisions that he made as he worked to provide the essential leadership that would result in improved academic achievement for students.

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Instructors' Notes and Scoring Guide The Contexts of Schooling

Assignments

Assignments for discussion

- Students are advised to discuss questions 1 through 5 using current research and this problem-based learning exercise's list of references (see below) to support the discussion points.
 1. Identify the critical issue** that, depending on how they are addressed, will influence the success/lack of success of Jake Finbough's leadership of Fairview High School. Explain why this is (these are) the critical issue(s).
 2. What are the political "do's" and "don'ts" that Mr. Finbough must remember as he provides change leadership? What are the potential consequences of ignoring the "do's" and "don'ts?"
 3. What social considerations for students and for the school community must influence Mr. Finbough's leadership and decisions? Explain your responses.
 4. Are there any legal issues or potential legal issues? If so, what are they?
 5. Identify the cultural characteristics of the internal and external school communities that make leadership at Fairview High School challenging, possibly quite difficult. Explain why those characteristics are particularly difficult, given the task Mr. Finbough must accomplish.

**Critical issues include the following: (a) what the principal does as a change agent, (b) context, process, and content established to address the student performance issues and to improve student achievement for all, and (c) building strong community support for the schools and for improving student achievement for all students.

Assignment to be scored:

- Students are advised to apply the indicators for Standard 6, the knowledge base about effective and successful leadership, and examples and sufficient analysis to give the following assignment a comprehensive treatment.
 - Assume you are Jake Finbough. Develop a plan of action that will demonstrate that you are an educational leader who promotes the success of all students by understanding, responding to, and influencing the larger political, social, economic, legal, and cultural context in which your high school is located. Indicate in the plan the following: a rationale for the plan, specific and measurable objectives for the plan, what specifically will be done, by whom, by when, who all will be involved, and how the plan will be assessed.

References

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- Spring, J. (1998). *Conflicts of Interests: The Politics of American Education*. Boston, MA: McGraw Hill.
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Scoring Guide (0-4 points)

4 points: The respondent's answer should include the following:

1. A plan with a clear rationale, measurable objectives, specific identification of what will be done, by whom, when, who is involved, and how the plan will be evaluated—all related to improving student achievement for all students explanation of the social and legal responsibilities of the school regarding the education of students
2. A discussion of how to address and/or resolve political issues associated with improving student achievement at Fairview High School, such as funding, working with the varied interests of stakeholders, aligning curriculum, improving instructional delivery, and accountability building a strong and supportive community culture for supporting school efforts to improve student achievement at Fairview High School

3 points: The respondent's answer should include the following:

- A plan with a clear rationale, measurable objectives, specific identification of what will be done, by whom, when, who is involved, and how the plan will be evaluated—all related to improving student achievement for all students and two (2) of the following:
 1. explanation of the social and legal responsibilities of the school regarding the education of students
 2. discussion of how to address and/or resolve political issues associated with improving student achievement at Fairview High School, such as funding,

3. working with the varied interests of stakeholders, aligning curriculum, improving instructional delivery, and accountability
4. building a strong and supportive community culture for supporting school efforts to improve student achievement at Fairview High School

2 points: The respondent's answer should include the following:

- A plan with a clear rationale, measurable objectives, specific identification of what will be done, by whom, when, who is involved, and how the plan will be evaluated—all related to improving student achievement for all students and one (1) of the following:
 1. explanation of the social and legal responsibilities of the school regarding the education of students
 2. discussion of how to address and/or resolve political issues associated with improving student achievement at Fairview High School, such as funding, working with the varied interests of stakeholders, aligning curriculum, improving instructional delivery, and accountability
 3. building a strong and supportive community culture for supporting school efforts to improve student achievement at Fairview High School

1 point: The respondent's answer should include the following:

- A plan with a clear rationale, measurable objectives, specific identification of what will be done, by whom, when, who is involved, and how the plan will be evaluated—all related to improving student achievement for all students

0 points:

- The respondent's answer does not present a plan with a clear rationale, measurable objectives, specific identification of what will be done, by whom, when, who is involved, and how the plan will be evaluated -- all related to improving student achievement for all students.

The following indicators should be reflected in each of the product components

A plan with a clear rationale, measurable objectives, specific identification of what will be done, by whom, when, who is involved, and how the plan will be evaluated—all related to improving student achievement for all students

- (Knowledge) Models and strategies of change and conflict resolution as applied to the larger political, social, cultural and economic contexts of schooling
- (Knowledge) Global issues and forces affecting teaching and learning
- (Knowledge) the dynamics of policy development and advocacy under our democratic political system
- (Knowledge) The importance of diversity and equity in a democratic society
- (Disposition) The importance of a continuing dialogue with other decision makers affecting education
- (Performance) Public policy is shaped to provide quality education for students

Explanation of the social and legal responsibilities of the school regarding the education of students

- (Knowledge) The law as related to education and schooling
- (Disposition) Education as a key to opportunity and social mobility
- (Disposition) Using legal systems to protect student rights and improve student opportunities

- (Performance) The environment in which schools operate is influenced on behalf of students and their families
- (Performance) The school community works within the framework of policies, laws, and regulations enacted by local, state, and federal authorities
- (Performance) Public policy is shaped to provide quality education for students

Discussion of how to address and/or resolve political issues associated with improving student achievement at Fairview High School, such as funding, working with the varied interests of stakeholders, aligning curriculum, improving instructional delivery, and accountability

- (Knowledge) Principles of representative governance that undergird the system of American schools
- (Disposition) Actively participating in the political and policy-making context in the service of education
- (Performance) Lines of communication are developed with decision makers outside the school community

Building a strong and supportive community culture for supporting school efforts to improve student achievement at Fairview High School

- (Knowledge) The role of public education in developing and renewing a democratic society and an economically productive nation
- (Disposition) Recognizing a variety of ideas, values, and cultures
- (Performance) Communication occurs among the school community concerning trends, issues, and potential changes in the environment in which schools operate
- (Performance) There is ongoing dialogue with representatives of diverse community groups