

## On Leadership

Joshua P. Starr

### Who are the real experts in your school system?

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Recently, I made my way through James Scott’s important book *Seeing Like a State: How Certain Schemes to Improve the Human Condition Have Failed* (1998). Scott argues that history is rife with examples of how leaders, policy makers, and bureaucrats have implemented solutions to complex problems that don’t take into account the realities on the ground. When leaders miss these essential contextual elements, the initiative either fails to help the people it was intended to serve or simply exploits them, to the benefit of the ruling class. From the imposition of surnames to ensure reliable tax collection, to the linear planting of trees in German forests, to the grid-based layout of city blocks, officials have made decisions that force people (or flora) to conform to the latest theory about how they are *supposed* to act, not how they actually live their lives. And then, as they say, stuff happens. People and trees behave in ways that subvert those intricate designs.

While reading Scott’s book I couldn’t help thinking about Raymond Callahan’s classic study *Education and the Cult of Efficiency* (1963). Callahan lays out how, in the early 20th century, superintendents and school boards attempted to use Frederick Taylor’s notion of scientific management — which was all the rage at the time, especially among captains of industry — to turn the messy enterprise of public education into a rational, well-oiled system. And then I thought of my own work.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, I was the director of accountability in Plainfield, New Jersey, a district of about 8,000 students in Union County. Almost all the students were Black or Latinx, and about 75% received free or reduced-price meals. The superintendent, Larry Leverett, was my mentor and a true visionary when it came to equity, teaching and learning, and community engagement. Although No Child Left Behind (NCLB) wasn’t yet law, he could see which way the wind was blowing, and he asked me to design a system that would be grounded in research and good practice, not just the whims of the state and the federal government. It was as though Larry had read Scott (he hadn’t) and saw how urgent it was to create an accountability system grounded in our local context and needs before a distant bureaucracy imposed one on us.

While I was designing that accountability system, the district was also in the midst of overhauling its elementary literacy program. We were getting good feedback about that initiative, and anecdotal evidence suggested that literacy instruction was improving, but Larry wanted to measure our progress in a more rigorous way, so that we could adjust our strategy if needed, and so that we could make sure we were applying the right balance of “pressure and support” to principals and schools. Rather than wait for the lagging indicators of spring state standardized tests, we needed leading indicators to tell us how to improve immediately. Thus, we designed and implemented a walk-through protocol.

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### What walk-throughs can do

Twenty years ago, walk-throughs emerged as a tool for both school and central office administrators to measure the progress of reform implementation. Districts that were overhauling their instructional programs and curricula to meet new state standards needed a way to measure “fidelity of implementation.” The theory was simple: If teachers followed the program as laid out by the experts who designed it, then student achievement would improve. There was a political angle as well — if teachers and schools followed the program and got the expected results, then superintendents would be able to show school boards and the community, as well as any resistant rank-and file teachers, that the money and time spent on the new program was worth it. But first, the superintendent and system leaders needed a tool that would help them understand whether schools were actually doing what they were supposed to.

Walk-through protocols delineate how a teacher should be engaging their students in learning. In Plainfield, because we were measuring literacy implementation, the tool reflected our expectations that teachers follow the National Center for Education and the Economy’s America’s Choice program. In effect, when we conducted walk-throughs, we used a checklist, made up of

observable actions and artifacts that were supposed to be part of a literacy rich classroom. Was there a word wall that students could readily access? Were desks arranged in groups, with a separate area for whole-group reading on a carpet? Was there a classroom-level library and a space for the teacher to conference with students? When asked how they chose the book they were reading, did students say they picked it on their own or that their teacher gave it to them? During small-group conferences, was the teacher or the student doing most of the talking? After the walk-through, the visitors would compile the data and meet with the school leadership team to discuss preliminary results. Then, a little later, we would complete a full report, giving our recommendations and specifying next steps.

Walk-throughs have merits. They are grounded in clear standards for what classrooms should look like, they promote coherence within and among schools, and they provide teachers and school and district leaders with specific, observable information about what's actually going on in schools. Yet, they can also distort our perspective on classroom life. Much like the government officials and district leaders described in Scott's and Callahan's books, those of us doing the walk-throughs can end up focusing on whether teachers and students are following our designs, rather than looking to see what they're actually doing.

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Walk-throughs explicitly locate expertise for instructional improvement in system leaders. This is an attractive and seemingly logical idea, as system leaders do want to help schools improve and, in many cases, they were expert teachers and school leaders before ascending to the district office. But the central office wasn't designed for instructional improvement, it was organized for fiscal and programmatic compliance with local, state, and federal regulations and for operational functions, such as food, building maintenance, technology support, purchasing of materials, and student transportation, among other things. It wasn't until NCLB forced schools to account for their actions and improve student outcomes, or suffer the consequences, that central offices had to shift to supporting improvements in teaching and learning. It's no surprise that system leaders designed processes based on their own familiarity and comfort. The lens by which they had always interacted with schools was simply widened to include instructional improvement. However, it's not clear that it should have been.

## Time to rethink

When children and teachers resume physical schooling, we'll have both an opportunity and a pressing need to rethink accountability and instructional improvement. Teachers and school leaders will have to quickly determine where students are relative to standards and then provide necessary supports. Based on what they learn about student progress, they will need to make decisions about what teachers should do differently to ensure students are on track. At the same time, they will need to consider what aspects of virtual learning should be kept or built on as school models continue to evolve. Districts and schools will need to invest heavily in adult learning in response to what the COVID-19 crisis revealed about what teachers need to know and be able to do. And it is likely that local school budgets will be significantly reduced in the midst of all this. It is essential that teachers be the leaders of this collective learning and that their expertise be relied on.

When we return to in-person school, even in a modified form, teacher leadership must be activated in new ways to ensure students' needs are being met. Central offices, which will surely face reduction and churn in the face of budget cuts, should narrow their scope to ensuring the equitable allocation of resources; collecting and distributing useful data, and providing funds, services, and resources in response to local needs. Further, central office personnel should focus on supporting teachers and staff who need help as they try to deal with a myriad of complex professional and personal issues.

If there were ever a time to maximize the capacity, knowledge, energy, and creativity of our teachers, this is it. Surely not every teacher will want to engage, or be capable of engaging, in this way. But there are certainly enough in every school and throughout every district to do so, and smart school and system leaders know who those folks are.

Walk-throughs gave me and my cabinet colleagues a great perspective on what was happening in Plainfield classrooms. We used that knowledge to support and improve literacy instruction, and student achievement increased. But I wonder what would have happened if, rather than enter classrooms with clipboards to check for compliance, we had asked our teachers to lead the conversation and the work. It may have looked a little different, but I suspect that if those who are closest to the problem were more deeply involved in designing the solutions, we'd all be better off.

**References**

Callahan, R. (1963). *Education and the cult of efficiency*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

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