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DISPLACING DEFICIT THINKING IN SCHOOL DISTRICT LEADERSHIP

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The law is very clear. It does not give us a choice of teaching just those that are easy to teach. The law says we shall teach all students.

—Gerald Anderson (superintendent of schools,
Brazosport Independent School District)

We need to void ourselves of an ego, primarily so that we can allow everybody else to grow, understanding that there is a goal in mind—that is student performance needs to improve. Not performance only as a test score.

—Felipe Alaniz (former superintendent,
San Benito Consolidated Independent School District)

INTRODUCTION AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Richard Valencia, in his 1997 book *The Evolution of Deficit Thinking*, compellingly argued that deficit thinking is the dominant paradigm that shapes U.S. educators' explanations for widespread and persistent school failure among children from low-income homes and children of color:

The deficit thinking paradigm, as a whole, posits that students who fail in school do so because of alleged internal deficiencies (such as cognitive and/or motivational limitations) or shortcomings socially linked to the youngster—such a familial deficits and dysfunctions. . . . The popular “at-risk” construct, now entrenched in educational circles, views poor and working class

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children and their families (typically of color) as predominantly responsible for school failure. (p. xi)

Valencia argued, further, that such deficit thinking is deeply embedded in educational thought and practice and that it pervades schools that serve children from low-income homes and children of color. That is, even though virtually every U.S. school has a mission statement containing some form of the aphorism "all children can learn," actual practices and programs in these same schools are suffused with deficit views of the educability of children of color and children from low-income homes. The result of this pervasive deficit approach is that students from low-income homes and students of color routinely and overwhelmingly are tracked into low-level classes, identified for special education, segregated based on their home languages, subjected to more and harsher disciplinary actions, pushed out of the system and labeled "dropouts," underidentified as "gifted and talented," immersed in negative and "subtractive" school climates, and sorted into a plethora of "remedial," "compensatory," or "special" programs (e.g., Oakes, Gamoran, & Page, 1992; Parker, 1993; Skiba, Peterson, & Williams, 1997; Valdés, 1998; Valenzuela, 1999).

As these and other traditionally accepted and widely implemented schooling structures and practices persistently fail to serve well children of color and children from low-income homes, these students perform at or near the bottom of virtually every measurement of educational attainment, including grade point averages, college admissions test scores, National Assessment of Educational Progress scores, high school graduation rates, and college enrollment rates (Jencks & Phillips, 1998). This low performance reinforces deficit views of these children and their families and becomes a driving force behind what Valencia (1997) described as a ubiquitous "description-explanation-prediction-prescription" cycle in U.S. public schools (p. 7). In other words, first, educators *describe* deficits, deficiencies, limitations, and shortcomings in children of color and children from low-income homes; next, educators *explain* these deficits by locating them in such factors as limited intelligence or dysfunctional families; then, educators *predict* the perpetuation and accumulation of the deficits; and, finally, educators *prescribe* educational interventions designed to remediate the deficits. This cycle has become self-perpetuating as the system in place in traditional U.S. schools, by design, produces failure for some students (see McDermott, 1997, for example), particularly students of color and students from low-income homes, and then uses the failure as evidence that the "problem" lies with/in the children, their families, their neighborhoods, their genetics,

their social capital, and so forth rather than with the educational system and its deficit assumptions.

Not surprisingly, then, school superintendents who lead school districts populated by children of color and children from low-income homes typically are also strongly affected by deficit thinking. Whether it is conscious or not, these superintendents' explanations of and expectations for what is possible educationally for the children in their districts are shaped by the larger deficit educational discourse that assumes these children will not succeed in school. Furthermore, the overwhelming majority of U.S. public school superintendents are White (95%) and male (86%) (Glass, Bjork, & Brunner, 2000), and it is likely that deficit views of children of color and children from low-income homes have been reinforced by these superintendents' own prior experiences as teachers and campus leaders. Even superintendents of color (who know that children of color can be highly successful because they themselves were those children) are influenced by and have to contend with the deficit thinking that suffuses every part of U.S. public schooling (Henig, Hula, Orr, & Pedescleaux, 1999). Thus, superintendents of school districts that serve children of color and children from low-income homes are unlikely to deeply, sincerely believe—though they may speak the “all children can learn” rhetoric—that their districts can or will successfully educate all the children in their charge. It is not, in other words, the serious, immediate intent of most superintendents of schools in districts that serve children of color and children from low-income home to produce widespread and equitable high academic achievement for all the children in all the schools in their districts. Because of the insidiously pervasive deficit thinking in which superintendents, along with the vast majority of other educators including teachers and principals, have been more or less marinated throughout their careers, these superintendents tend to view the broad-scale underperformance of children of color and children from low-income homes in their schools as inevitable, something that is not within their power to change.

Indeed, accumulated empirical evidence from decades of U.S. public schooling would tend to support the above conclusion. U.S. schools and school districts have posted a miserable record in demonstrating sustained success with educating African American, Latina/Latino, Native American, or other children of color, or children of any race from low-income homes (Lomotey, 1990). There have been some examples of individual schools that have achieved remarkable results in educating children of color and children from low-income homes, such as those Ronald Edmonds (1986) studied. However, these schools have been most often regarded as “miracles” or “mavericks” led by exceptional, heroic principals, and broader scale success

has been almost nonexistent. In addition, historically there have been virtually no examples of entire school districts that have been successful educating children of color or children from low-income homes for any period of time.

With no exemplar school districts or, by extension, superintendents demonstrating that districtwide high academic performance for racially and economically diverse students is possible and achievable, deficit thinking has remained the dominant, unchallenged paradigm that school district leaders have used to explain to others or make sense to themselves of the “persistent, pervasive, and disproportionate” (Lomotey, 1990, p. 2) underachievement in school of children of color and children from low-income homes. Within the past 5 years, however, a few examples of sustained districtwide academic success for children of color and children from low-income homes have begun to emerge in the research literature. These examples have appeared in states that have highly developed, stable accountability systems with equity-oriented components, such as New York, North Carolina, and Texas (see, e.g., Elmore & Burney, 1997; North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, 2000; Ragland, Asera, & Johnson, 1999). Preliminary research in some of these districts points to the possibility that the superintendents have found ways to resist deficit thinking and, thus, to make strong, demonstrable progress toward educational equity in their districts.

The fact that these districts have emerged in high-stakes accountability states is not, in our view, coincidental. In the research study on which this article is based, which focused on four highly successful Texas school districts, it became clear early on to the research team that the particular configuration of the Texas accountability system had played a crucial role in the transformation of the districts under study. It also soon became clear in conversations with the superintendents that the accountability system had been influential in reshaping their orientations toward the leadership of their districts. In effect, responding to the demands of an extremely high-stakes state accountability system that explicitly required the same level of academic success for all student groups (including African American, Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged) had displaced—though certainly not totally eliminated—deficit thinking for these superintendents. We identified five major ways in which accountability operated to accomplish this substantial displacement of deficit thinking in the superintendents’ leadership in our study districts. These five methods of displacement are discussed (after a section that outlines study methodology) in the remainder of this article.

METHOD

Four Texas public school districts, with student populations ranging from 8,000 to 50,000, served as the study sites for the research on which this article is based. These districts were selected for multiyear, grant-funded study¹ because they all had demonstrated significant improvement on Texas state achievement tests (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills [TAAS]) for children of color and children from low-income homes and had closed achievement gaps between the performance of these children and that of White, middle-class students. These districts were also selected based on a broad range of other quantitative evidence of improvement in academic performance for all student groups, including African American, Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged students.

In 1997, a pilot study for the current project identified 11 Texas public school districts (out of 1,045 districts in Texas, not including charter schools) that met two criteria for equitable districtwide success: a district enrollment of more than 5,000 students (to ensure multiple campuses and, thus, a “district” effect) and more than one third of high-poverty campuses (schools at which more than 50% of students were eligible for federal free or reduced-price lunch assistance) rated “recognized” or “exemplary” in the state accountability system. To earn a recognized rating in the Texas system, at least 80% of all students, as well as 80% of African American, Hispanic, White, and low-income students, must pass each section (reading, writing, and mathematics) of TAAS and meet additional dropout and attendance standards. To be rated exemplary, schools and districts must have a 90% pass rate for all groups in all subjects tested on TAAS and meet attendance and dropout standards.

During the summer of 1999 (at the beginning of current research and 2 years after the beginning of the pilot study), analysis of Texas school district performance data using the same screening criteria that were used in the pilot study (which produced 11 districts) yielded a list of 36 school districts. This indicated that the number of districts with several high-achieving, high-poverty schools had increased sharply in 2 years. However, the vast majority of the high-poverty campuses receiving recognized or exemplary ratings statewide both in 1997 and in 1999 were elementary schools. To be considered districtwide success, high and equitable academic achievement should not end with sixth grade. Therefore, a third selection criterion was added: Districts selected for study had to have at least two secondary (middle school or high school) campuses rated recognized or exemplary. The addition

of this criterion reduced the number of districts under consideration for study to 15. A fourth level of screening was then applied to minimize the likelihood that questionable district practices could have artificially inflated student performance gains. Any districts that had high (above state average for similar schools) exemptions from testing for students receiving special education or students with limited English proficiency (LEP), excessive dropout rates, or excessive ninth-grade retention rates were eliminated from consideration for study.

This left 11 districts on the list for the fifth level of the selection process, which involved evaluation of longitudinal performance data on high-end academic measures, including percentage of disaggregated student groups taking and scoring above standard college admission criteria on the SAT/ACT,² percentage of disaggregated student groups earning passing scores on Algebra end-of-course tests,³ percentage of disaggregated student groups completing the college-preparatory Recommended High School Program,⁴ and percentage of disaggregated student groups enrolled in advanced-placement (AP) courses and earning a score of 3 or higher on AP tests. Although none of the 11 districts demonstrated the same rapid improvement for all disaggregated student groups or narrowed the gaps between the performance of White and middle-class children and children of color and children from low-income homes on these measures to the same degree as they had on TAAS, several districts had both improved performance and narrowed gaps on one or more of these measures. The districts that had done so (7 in all) remained under consideration for study. The final 4 districts ultimately selected from the finalist group of 7 were chosen to represent the diversity (geographic, district size, and racial/ethnic composition) of the state of Texas (see Table 1).

The districts chosen were Aldine Independent School District (ISD), Brazosport ISD, San Benito Consolidated ISD (CISD), and Wichita Falls ISD. Only 1 district (Brazosport) chosen for study was also included in the pilot study. (Aldine was identified as one of the 11 high-success districts in 1997 but did not participate in the pilot phase of the project.) The 4 districts selected for study had multiple indicators of widespread improvement in student performance for all student groups. Brief profiles of the four districts follow.

PARTICIPANT DISTRICTS

Aldine ISD is one of the 12 largest school districts in Texas, with 56 campuses and almost 50,000 students. It is located in the northwest Houston

TABLE 1
Characteristics of Districts Selected for Study

<i>District</i>	<i>Total Students</i>	<i>Number of Schools</i>	<i>Percentage of African American</i>	<i>Percentage Hispanic</i>	<i>Percentage White</i>	<i>Percentage Low Income</i>	<i>1999- 2000 Rating</i>	<i>Location</i>
Aldine	49,453	56	36	47	14	71	Recognized	Metro Houston
Brazosport	13,247	19	9	33	56	39	Exemplary	Gulf Coast
San Benito	8,697	17	0	97	3	87	Recognized	Rio Grande Valley
Wichita Falls	15,293	31	16	18	63	46	Recognized	Northwest Texas

SOURCE: Texas Education Agency (1999b).

metropolitan area and covers 111 square miles. Its schools serve a variety of communities including rural, suburban, commercial, and industrial areas. The student population is 47% Hispanic, 36% African American, 14% White, and 71% economically disadvantaged. The district earned a recognized accountability rating in 1999-2000 for the 4th consecutive year. Mr. M. B. "Sonny" Donaldson is the superintendent in Aldine.

Brazosport ISD is located on the Texas gulf coast, 50 miles southwest of Houston, and serves a diverse group of small towns and communities. About 50,000 residents live in the area, and the school district's enrollment is 13,247 students. The children in Brazosport ISD are 56% White, 33% Hispanic, 9% African American, and 39% economically disadvantaged. Brazosport has been rated exemplary for the past 3 years and was rated recognized for the 2 previous years. At the time study data were collected, Dr. Gerald Anderson was the Brazosport superintendent.

San Benito CISD is located in the Rio Grande Valley area of South Texas, 7 miles east of the small city of Harlingen. The primary industry for the area is agriculture. The town of San Benito has a population of 26,350; the school district serves 8,697 pupils. The students in San Benito CISD are 97% Hispanic, 3% White, and 87% economically disadvantaged. The district has held a recognized accreditation rating for 5 consecutive years, beginning in 1995-96. Mr. Joe D. González is the San Benito superintendent. He was preceded by Dr. Felipe Alaniz, who also participated in study interviews.

Wichita Falls ISD is located in northwest Texas, approximately 100 miles north of the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. The city of Wichita Falls has approximately 100,000 residents and is home to Sheppard Air Force Base, Midwestern State University, and a variety of petroleum- and agriculture-based industries. Wichita Falls ISD has 15,293 students; 63% are White, 18%

are Hispanic, 16% are African American, and 46% are economically disadvantaged. In 1999-2000, Wichita Falls ISD earned an recognized rating for the first time. Dr. Connie Welsh is superintendent of Wichita Falls ISD. Her predecessor, under whom the district's transformation began, was Leslie Carnine.

DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS

A team of six researchers (the two authors; plus Joseph F. Johnson of the Charles A. Dana Center at University of Texas at Austin, and three graduate research assistants, Dawn Hogan, James Koschoreck, and Pamela Smith) made multiple site visits to the four districts in fall 1999 and spring 2000 for the purpose of collecting extensive qualitative data. While in the districts, we interviewed board members, superintendents, central office staff, principals, teachers, parents, newspaper staff, business leaders, and community members. We also shadowed district staff and principals, observed classrooms, and attended community functions. The research team audio-recorded more than 200 individual and group interviews and collected thousands of pages of observation notes and documents. Data analysis began on the first day of the first site visit, included twice-daily team-debriefing sessions, and continued for 6 months following the completion of site visits. The research team also used qualitative research software, *Folio Views 4.2*, to assist in the coding and thematizing of the large volume of interview transcripts and documents. The study results concerning the displacement of deficit thinking in school district leadership discussed in this article have been pulled from the larger set of findings from this multiyear study. Additional portions of the study findings will be reported in other academic and practitioner-oriented publications (see Skrla, Scheurich, & Johnson, 2000).

RESULTS: FIVE WAYS ACCOUNTABILITY DISPLACES DEFICIT THINKING

The four superintendents in our study districts participated in multiple interviews (two-four each) during the course of the research team's site visits to the districts. Additional superintendent interview data were gathered during pilot study interviews with Brazosport superintendent Gerald Anderson and a single interview with Felipe Alaniz, the former San Benito superintendent who preceded Joe González. Also, interviews with central office staff, principals, teachers, board members, parents, and community members

included questions about the superintendents' leadership and influence on the districts' transformations. During all of the interviews with the superintendents themselves, which were conducted by various members of the research team singly and in pairs, the superintendents frequently mentioned the impact of the state accountability system on them and on the transformation that had taken place in their districts. They also often gave examples of their current thinking contrasted with how they thought "back in the olden days" (as Aldine superintendent Sonny Donaldson phrased it) before state accountability. Sometimes, the superintendents were amazingly candid about the deficit thinking that dominated their prior leadership perspective, as when Gerald Anderson, the Brazosport superintendent, told us,

I have made this transformation that all kids can learn, from one that thought we were going to have an extremely difficult time with these kids because of their low socioeconomic condition. . . . It [the new transformed perspective] isn't something I've had all my life.

Other superintendents discussed the shift in their thinking less directly. Nonetheless, all five superintendents we interviewed strongly credited the Texas accountability system with playing a major role in transformations of their districts and in assisting them as leaders to alter the prevailing deficit norms in their school districts. The five ways accountability operated to displace this deficit thinking included the following: (a) providing highly visible, irrefutable evidence, which could not be ignored, that the districts were *not* serving all children equally well; (b) shifting the political risk inherent in confronting racial and socioeconomic class educational inequity and in mandating improved performance for all student groups away from the district leadership to the state department of education; (c) forcing the superintendents to seek out exemplars of successful classrooms and schools for children of color and children from low-income homes and, thus, to grow as instructional leaders; (d) causing the superintendents to reevaluate deficit views and develop antideficit orientations to district leadership; and (e) driving ever-increasing expectations of and higher goals for academic achievement for all groups of children as incremental success was experienced. Each of these is discussed below.

ACCOUNTABILITY MAKES EDUCATIONAL INEQUITY VISIBLE

In the early 1990s (TAAS was given for the first time in 1991; the current system began in 1994), the Texas accountability system revealed low passing

rates statewide on TAAS for African American, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged students and large gaps between the performance of these groups and that of White children and children from middle- and upper-income homes. For example, in 1994, the passing rate on the mathematics portion of TAAS statewide was 38% for African American students, 47% for Hispanic students, 45% for economically disadvantaged students, and 73% for White students (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 1994). In other words, statewide, White students passed the math test at a rate that was nearly double the passing rate for African American students in 1994.

In some individual schools and districts, the performance for children of color and children from low-income homes on TAAS and other reported indicators was dramatically worse than were the, already low, state figures. In our study districts, for example, Brazosport had an elementary campus at which only 8.3% of African American children passed TAAS math in 1993. And, only 33.8% of African American students passed the math TAAS in the entire Wichita Falls district in 1994. Data on other performance indicators beyond TAAS showed even more dismal performance in some areas.

All of this data and much more was publicly available and readily accessible (through the TEA's Web site: www.tea.state.tx.us), not only to educators but to anyone else who had an interest in how schools or districts were performing—this included the media, activist groups, parents, community members, policy makers, and researchers. These extensive data showed clearly that all students were not benefiting to the same degree from the educational programs in the study districts, and this had a profound effect on their superintendents. Before the advent of state accountability, the study districts' superintendents, like the majority of their fellow superintendents, had been able to ignore indications that their districts might not be serving all students equitably. Furthermore, prevailing deficit thinking allowed the inequities to be explained away as normal and inevitable.

Explaining away inequitable student achievement and ignoring student performance indicators generally was possible and was, in fact, standard operating procedure for superintendents in preaccountability Texas because, back then, the assessment of a "good" superintendent was made primarily based on his or her political shrewdness and skill and on managerial-type indicators, such as financial stability, clean buildings, and well-behaved students. Rowan and Miskel (1999, drawing from Meyer & Rowan's 1977 work) described this type of judgment of superintendent ability as being based on how close the superintendent was able to bring the school district to widely shared organizational norms of "good schooling." They argued, further, that adherence to these norms was actually more important for the

survival of institutions such as schools (and likewise their superintendents' professional survival) than was fulfilling the "technical core" mission of the school district—educating students—and that this allowed school leaders to ignore information that showed that the core mission was not being fulfilled:

A logic of confidence and good faith develops in organizations as administrators deliberately ignore and discount information about technical activities and outcomes [such as teaching and learning] in order to maintain the appearance that things are working as they should be, even if they aren't. In this way, organizations continue to mobilize support and resources simply by conforming to externally-defined rules, even when such rules do not promote technical efficiency. . . . The legitimacy of schooling as an enterprise depend[s] crucially on maintaining the public's confidence . . . and this require[s] educators (and the public) to ignore obvious variations in classroom activities and student outcomes that occur within standardized forms of schooling. (p. 363)

Thus, prior to accountability, the superintendents in the study districts worked to maintain the status quo and the appearance of good schooling (although they did not conceptualize it as such at the time) and ignored or dismissed information that contradicted this appearance. Gerald Anderson described this maintenance orientation to the superintendency: "I probably could have been considered just your normal superintendent that thought if you won the state football championship and all that sort of stuff, that that was the most important thing."

Although superintendents in Texas today typically still care deeply about football championships, the advent of the Texas accountability system interrupted the comfortable pattern of institutional conformity over which the superintendents had previously presided. Because of the particular configuration of accountability measures in the Texas system, it caused dramatic, and often sudden, changes in expectations for the role of superintendent in Texas. The system components that, taken together, affected expectations for superintendents were the following: (a) Texas school and school district accountability is based on a criterion-reference test rather than on a norm-referenced test; (b) it has fixed standards of performance required for all student groups (as opposed to rating on "improvement" or predicting pass rates based on demographics as some systems do); and (c) it disaggregates data by racial group and socioeconomic status. An illustration of how this configuration of accountability measures affected expectations for superintendent performance was Gerald Anderson's description of his first encounter with the force of accountability:

[At] my very first board meeting as superintendent [in Brazosport], we had a group of parents from Freeport, which is a predominantly low socioeconomic community, that came before the board with some good data [generated by the accountability system]. In the public forum portion of the board meeting they asked that very uncomfortable question to the board and myself—why are the students in Freeport not performing at the same level as the students in Lake Jackson, which is a middle and upper class socioeconomic community. Needless to say that is a very uncomfortable question for board members, for sure, and for the superintendent to have to respond to. Because we have been conditioned to think [that some students] just aren't going to do as well as other kids because they don't have that support at home. . . . The significance of that incident is that it motivated us—it focused us on addressing the issue.

Gerald Anderson's success in Brazosport has attracted considerable national and international attention in the past 3 years, and he tells the story of the transformation of his district frequently at workshops, speaking engagements, and seminars. He typically begins his story with the above incident, which a Latina central office administrator in Brazosport described to us as "the Hispanic people put together a little welcome . . . that really challenged Dr. Anderson."

Similarly, Sonny Donaldson, who had been superintendent in Aldine for 14 years at the time the study data were collected, talked about how the accountability system data forced him and other district administrators to confront the inequitable achievement in the district that they previously ignored, and he even went so far as to say that they probably would not have looked at the data unless required to by the state. Donaldson also talked about how, before these data were available and before they were required to look at them, the district leadership had unrealistically positive views of the academic success of the district's African American and Hispanic students. He said that, because Aldine had African American high school valedictorians and some Hispanic students who excelled academically, he and other administrators assumed children of color were "doing fine" in Aldine.

Felipe Alaniz, who was superintendent in San Benito when the district's transformation began in 1994, said that the accountability system played a key role in starting the improvement in that district by highlighting the problem of poor student performance:

We used [the accountability system] as a tool to measure competency and progress. In my eyes we used it as a starting point to illuminate what the district didn't have, to show that what we were doing in the classroom was perhaps dysfunctional. . . . We knew we had a disjointed structure in the curriculum and

what we were doing and the materials that we had and what was being taught. That was pretty obvious to us [from looking at the accountability data].

In much the same way, Connie Welsh, the Wichita Falls superintendent who came to the district in 1997, described her view that performance data indicated district dysfunction, something that she learned by researching the district's performance prior to accepting the superintendent's job:

I'm a data person, and I make no decision lightly. Of course I pulled up everything [about the district] on the Internet that I possibly could. I talked to Les Carmine [the former superintendent]. . . . As I looked at it, I saw a district that had some good things that were there, but I also sensed a great amount of dysfunctionality. [Some of the scores were] horrible, horrible.

Dr. Welsh used accountability data to not only identify and build on district strengths but also to target areas of dysfunctionality, such as a lack of instructional focus indicated by extremely low achievement test scores.

In sum, publicly available, empirical data that demonstrated differential educational success for students distributed along race and social class lines acted to begin the displacement of deficit thinking for the study district superintendents. The superintendents were, in effect, forced to adapt to new demands created by public visibility of student performance.

STATE ACCOUNTABILITY REDUCES RISK FOR SUPERINTENDENTS

In the absence of a state mandate to disaggregate student performance data and meet specific and equitable performance criteria for all racial and socioeconomic groups of students, a superintendent who challenges existing patterns of academic inequality within the district himself or herself engages in a politically risky undertaking. Persons of power and influence in communities, many of whom are likely to be school board members, may be deeply uncomfortable with confronting educational inequity (Puriefoy, 2000). One of the study superintendents described the situation as a lack of understanding of the importance of educating all children equally well:

[Board members sometimes] don't understand the complexity. They come from a place where they support, but really don't understand, that it's important that all children be successful. They are in a different social arena. They don't understand how much work it takes to do what it is that we're doing. We are

doing it because it's good for children and because we're committed to children, and they don't see the significance of that, the importance of that.

Superintendents who take on the challenge of addressing educational inequity (and thus resist the dominance of deficit thinking that explains away or views as natural inequities in student achievement), in the absence of a state accountability system that requires disaggregation of data, often find themselves embroiled in local political controversy, and these superintendents must expend considerable political capital maintaining support for confronting inequity along race and socioeconomic class lines.

The specific design of the Texas accountability system, however, reduces political risk for superintendents by mandating from the state level that performance be considered by disaggregated groups and that the performance of *all* student groups be considered in the ratings of campuses and districts and in the evaluations of teachers, principals, and superintendents. Aldine superintendent Sonny Donaldson explained the importance of a state-mandated equity focus:

The state leadership has to set the agenda. I think individual schools can do it [create high and equitable student success], but I think the people that control the gold, the money, they're going to have to commit to something like this. . . . There has to be an expectation created by someone at the state level, and if the state level doesn't do it, it will just have to go on the strength of the superintendent's personality and the support he has from the board.

As Mr. Donaldson pointed out, the superintendent who does not have the force of the state behind her or him in confronting educational inequity and the deficit thinking that protects the status quo is in a vulnerable position.

Furthermore, the disaggregated data provided by the Texas accountability system (but not by most other states) was considered one of the essential factors for improving student performance by our study district superintendents. From Gerald Anderson:

Some [states] are not disaggregating their data. Some of them are reporting it by all students. That's a big mistake. . . . Whether we believe that the state accountability system or the TAAS test is all that good, the effects of what the state has pushed us to do is going to have the effect of us doing a better job of teaching all kids.

As this quote illustrates, the superintendents saw the state system as a needed "push" that resulted in better education for all children.

The “push” of the accountability system was viewed positively by our study district superintendents, but they also were mindful that balance was essential. In other words, the state pressure could become a negative force if the district did not provide appropriate support and training for teachers to enable them to meet continuously rising state performance expectations. Joe González described this as his biggest challenge—making sure that his district was equipped to handle the new, higher expectations coming from expanded state accountability, which, beginning in 2003, will include a more difficult test, tests in more subjects, and testing at additional grade levels (9th and 11th) not included in the current accountability system:

The biggest challenge is to continue to motivate the instructional staff because of all the [accountability] changes TEA is coming up with, staying up with staff development and everything else to ensure that our teachers are being provided the training and the tools necessary to meet those challenges for the children. . . . We are good at what we do; we just have to refine. I told [the staff] that there’s always going to be obstacles that the state’s going to throw at us, new initiatives that they feel are good for the state. So we just go to meet them, meet the challenge and keep moving.

Mr. González, thus, used the force of rising state accountability expectations positively in communicating his own expectations for student performance in his district.

All the superintendents in our study districts were, consequently, able to use state accountability to work against deficit thinking and against the description-explanation-prediction-prescription cycle that maintained students of color and students from low-income homes at the bottom of school achievement measures without as much risk as they otherwise would have faced in challenging these issues. Because the Texas state accountability system mandated that scores be reported by disaggregated student groups and that fixed and equitable student performance criteria be reached, performance inequities within the study districts, by law if not by local choice, had to be confronted.

ACCOUNTABILITY FORCES SUPERINTENDENTS TO SEEK SUCCESS EXEMPLARS

The prevalence of deficit thinking in school district leadership is compounded by the dominant view of the superintendency that holds that women and men in these positions do not have much direct impact on instructional

matters or on student learning in any case (Coleman & LaRocque, 1990). The common perspective is that the superintendency is a position remote from classroom learning and that superintendents' more appropriate roles are tending to the political, cultural, financial, and logistical domains of schooling, leaving teaching and learning to the campuses, which are viewed as properly the site of school reform (Berry & Achilles, 1999). As Petersen (1999) found, superintendents generally have abdicated the instructional leadership role to others within the organization, most usually campus principals.

With the advent of state accountability in Texas, the study district superintendents were pushed to move out of the traditional managerial or political superintendent role and focus on instruction, particularly on instructional practices that supported equitable achievement for all children. Gerald Anderson put it this way:

[In my two previous superintendencies,] I was not an instructional leader. I was a manager. I was just managing the schools. I didn't have a strong instructional focus. . . . I have to give the state accountability system the credit for bringing about the motivation [to change].

Just as Gerald Anderson was motivated to change by the state accountability system, Sonny Donaldson described his response to the realization that Aldine students were not performing well on the state achievement tests and that the district leadership would need to figure out a way to respond:

I said, "Nadine [Kujawa, the deputy superintendent], find out who's doing a good job with kids like we have. And there weren't many districts in the state that had kids like we have. We visited around and looked at the work they'd been doing. Jerry [Anderson, the Brazosport superintendent] was almost like we were, not quite like we were but about fifty percent [low-income children]. He came up and did a staff development. We went to North Forest; they had a teacher over there that was doing great things in Algebra.

Donaldson admittedly did not know what needed to be done to raise achievement for children of color and children from low-income homes in his district, but he and other district leaders took the initial step of finding models of instructional success (including Brazosport) from which they could learn. Connie Welsh, also, talked about the value of using Brazosport's success as a model on which to build her district's program: "We hooked into Brazosport's 8-Step model, basically using it for data analysis and planning instructional programs and planning for individual kids—the academic focus."

Additionally, Felipe Alaniz described learning how to focus the district and campuses on instructional performance for all children. His initial learning came from his previous experience as an assistant superintendent in West Texas, not with the current accountability system but with its predecessor, "Results Based Monitoring:"

We learned from [Results Based Monitoring]. One of the things we learned from putting that in place was the ability to have each of the schools internalize what they were good at and not so good at. Then to make a proactive response and have the central office become a support team . . . and develop a plan of assistance for each campus.

Results Based Monitoring, like the present accountability system, created a learning opportunity for Alaniz that he then used to initiate change in San Benito.

All five superintendents whom we interviewed talked to us about having to personally respond and grow as instructional leaders to meet the demands placed on them by the accountability system. Prior to accountability, these superintendents had enjoyed successful careers without ever having to learn how to create district conditions in which all children could learn successfully. After the advent of accountability, however, the state required all districts to achieve fixed performance standards for all student groups. In districts that initially preformed far below the acceptable standards, these superintendents made decisions to learn how to create districtwide success.

ACCOUNTABILITY DEVELOPS ANTIDEFICIT LEADERSHIP ORIENTATIONS

Carolyn Riehl (2000), in a review of research on principals' roles in creating inclusive schools, described the crucial role school leaders play in influencing meaning-making in schools:

As institutionalized organizations, schools embody a complex array of understandings, beliefs, and values that find legitimacy through their acceptance by the broader public and that are encoded in school structures, cultures, and routine practices. Schools are, in effect, constructed around the meanings that people hold about them. Real organizational change occurs not simply when technical changes in structure and process are undertaken, but when persons inside and outside of the school construct new understandings about what the change means. In this regard, the role of the school principal is crucial. Although meanings are negotiated socially, that is through a shared process (Miron,

1997), leaders typically have additional power in defining situations and their meanings. (p. 60)

The same point the Riehl made about principals—that they have great power and influence in shaping (and also changing) what meanings are shared by others in their schools—could just as aptly be made about superintendents' influence on meaning-making in their districts.

In the “olden days” that Sonny Donaldson spoke of, that is, preaccountability Texas, deficit thinking was the dominant paradigm that shaped the ways educators made meaning about the lack of school success for children of color and children from low-income homes. These deficit views were shared, largely unproblematically, by the majority of educators in the study districts. Our interview data are, in fact, filled with countless references from interviewees other than the superintendents that describe deficit orientations that existed in these schools and districts. For example, a former San Benito board member described the old viewpoint among those on the board as that the most important issues for board members were to keep taxes low and to stay in minimal compliance with the law. He said that, because the children in the district were from low-income homes, many of which did not have air conditioning, the board members felt there was no need to air condition the schools because, as he said, “gnats don’t bother them when they are studying.” Likewise, a central office administrator in Brazosport criticized earlier deficit attitudes of herself and others when she said that she and other administrators felt “noble” about working in high-poverty schools because they kept the children “warm, safe, and on a regular schedule” and that they thought the poor academic performance of the students was “inevitable and not anyone’s fault.”

These four districts today are very different places than they were when their transformations began in the early 1990s. Deficit views of the educability of children of color and children from low-income homes have been significantly displaced. However, this does not mean that deficit thinking has been totally eliminated in any of the four districts. Our interviews and observations showed that the deficit discourse is still in circulation, more so in some schools and less so in others. But the deficit discourse was no longer the dominant one in any of the districts.

The key person in all four districts who led the change in shared meaning about the education of children of color and children of low-income homes was the superintendent. All five of the superintendents we interviewed very clearly articulated what could be considered antideficit leadership orientations. These viewpoints were developed during the course of multiple years of responding to and achieving laudable success in a high-stakes account-

ability environment. An example of how the superintendents articulated this antideficit orientation was Connie Welsh's linking of the success of society to the efforts to educate children for whom learning may not come easily or automatically:

You've got a group of kids, there's a whole top group of kids that come to our door that learn in spite of us, not because of us. That's that top group; they're learning in spite of us. You just have to throw it out there and they feed on it. But then you have this other group of children that does take a very focused effort and a real strong plan in order to get them to move. But they can. That's really going to be the success of our entire society. We have to do it. I've been at this for 35 years, and . . . if nothing else on my tombstone, I want somebody to say I was able to make a difference.

Welsh's passionate conviction that "we have to do it [educate all children]" was echoed by Gerald Anderson:

I heard enough of people thinking that they just couldn't reach those students as much, perhaps because of the home environment and because of the lack of educational preparation that they brought to the door. I too believed that there was going to be great difficulty with that because of the lack of educational preparation coming from the home. But I have come to know that even though we can do some things to help that, we cannot make excuses for that. . . . You cannot let anything deter you from that instructional focus and you have to believe the kids can do it.

For both of these superintendents, the necessity of educating literally all children to high levels of success was a deeply held conviction that they articulated clearly, forcefully, and repeatedly whenever and wherever they spoke to individuals and groups in their districts.

A similar sense of moral obligation to educate all children and belief that such was possible was expressed by Sonny Donaldson:

I think that all our kids can learn when given the time and resources and the proper motivation, and they can do it. Don't get me wrong, we are not where we need to be, but we are a hell of a lot closer now than we were five years ago. We have narrowed the gap. . . . I want to win the battle against ignorance and illiteracy because it is the right thing to do. It's my job and it's my profession; it's what I am about.

Just as the Aldine superintendent had come to believe that educating everyone was "what I am about," the San Benito superintendent, Joe González, felt

that educating the Hispanic children in his district successfully was his life's work:

Having 97% Hispanic kids is, this is our life. I hear other superintendents wanting advice from me about what we're doing to help the kids. You know, they don't know what to do with them, and they have 30% or 40%, making me feel like they just got some type of animal. They forget that they're children just like anybody else. . . . I look at them as children. . . . I'm very, very competitive and I hold very high expectations of our kids. I don't believe that they are going to flop, and I don't let anybody believe that that's going to work with them.

As these quotes clearly illustrate, the superintendents articulated antideficit stances that played critical and significant roles in shaping what meanings were shared in these districts about the education of children of color and children from low-income homes.

ACCOUNTABILITY DRIVES SUCCESSIVELY HIGHER EXPECTATIONS

Even though all the superintendents we interviewed in the four study districts discussed their districts' efforts to raise student performance on TAAS, they also all also talked about their goals for the districts to have high and equitable success on other measures of student performance beyond the state achievement tests. Furthermore, they often described these new higher goals as being linked to successful experiences with raising student performance on the TAAS. In other words, they may have gone through a period of narrowly focusing on state test performance, but they did not stay there. Once they saw that all students could achieve at much higher levels than previously accepted in their districts as the (deficit-driven) norm, they all began to articulate higher expectations for their students' success.

Gerald Anderson, whose entire district was rated exemplary and had all 18 campuses earn recognized or exemplary performance ratings, talked about what the current district motto "exemplary and beyond" meant and his recognition that the district had not "arrived" in terms of broadly defined academic excellence:

We do have equity in our district. We have equity. We closed the gap. But I can't lay claim to being an excellent district until such time that I've closed the gap with AP, with SAT, with ACT, with all those "beyond" indicators. . . . Right now what you will find [in Brazosport] is like the definition of an Effective School, a school in which equal proportions of low and middle income kids evidence

high levels of mastery of the basic curriculum, what we consider to be just the essential curriculum, but it's not the entire curriculum.

He went on to describe significant indicators of progress on a higher-end academic measure that went beyond what is measured by TAAS:

The reason why our Algebra [End-of-Course test passing rate] is twice as high as the state of Texas is because we use [a district-developed instructional process] and [have] the belief that "I am accountable to teach these kids." . . . Discipline referrals are down, the numbers of classes we have to remediate kids is down, the numbers of students in our higher level courses is up, the numbers of students taking dual and concurrent college courses is up. Dropout rates are down. . . . I put a lot of pressure on our people not to let kids drop out because they're about to make the worst mistake of their life.

Dr. Anderson's comments about dropout rates, particularly, indicate that, at least in his district, academic success for children of color and children from low-income homes is not being achieved at the cost of pushing these children out of the system. Joe González made a similar point about the tactic of raising student performance by overreferring students to special education programs or exempting them from testing due to LEP: "We are testing 90-plus percent of the population. Hiding the kids [through exemptions] is something I totally won't tolerate. I don't believe in hiding kids in closets."

Another indicator of rising expectations for student success among these superintendents came from Sonny Donaldson, who described to us his strong desire to have higher college admissions test scores for the students in Aldine:

We are going to have some national merit scholarships. Not just [students scoring] 1000+. We also have to do a better job of placing our kids, putting those kids in the courses that are rigorous that the kids can handle. We are not doing a good job on that. I don't want to hear about a kid who scored 1250 and was not in one advanced class. That happened once and my blood pressure went through the roof. . . . If we are going to be a school district of excellence, we cannot have that.

Clearly, Donaldson was committed to achieving higher measures of academic excellence in his district.

Connie Welsh, also, talked about rising expectations for high student performance beyond TAAS in describing her hopes for a new focus on pre-AP curriculum in Wichita Falls that was supported by grant funding and specifically targeted diverse groups of children:

Pre-AP is going to have a significant impact with our lower functioning kids because those are the kids, the poor kids, the ones that who never saw themselves as being eligible for AP, honors, and all that kind of stuff. We're trying to stimulate a much bigger, broad base of people who feel they can do the pre-AP. I think we are going to bring in more minorities, were going to bring in more of our socio-economically disadvantaged kinds into the playing field. They have the potential. It's just a matter of, again, expectation. They do what people expect of them.

High expectations for all students was, thus, a key point that Welsh emphasized repeatedly as central to her leadership.

Indeed, none of the five superintendents, during the time of our interviews, was content to define student success as high pass rates on TAAS. These superintendents definitely did not think that offering a minimal curriculum that covered only what was measured by the state achievement exam was the correct or desirable response to accountability in districts that served large percentages of children of color and children from low-income homes.

CONCLUSION

What can be concluded from the research in these four districts is that the Texas high-stakes accountability system significantly (but not completely) displaced the deficit-thinking orientation of the superintendents. These superintendents and their districts did not, however, reach the absolute democratic ideal that we all seek—truly high and equal performance of all children, regardless of their race, ethnicity, home language, culture, socioeconomic class, and so forth. What they did accomplish was one significant, critically important step on the journey toward that ideal. The superintendents, in collaboration with their board members, community allies, and other school leaders, moved the academic success levels and school experiences for children of color and children from low-income homes in these districts out of the dank and hideous basement of failure and invisibility where, prior to state accountability, they had remained undisturbed. The academic achievement and school treatment of children of color in the four study districts moved from this deficit basement to the main and well-lighted floor where it became the focus for teachers, principals, central office staff, and superintendents. This impressive progress from basement to main floor was evidenced not only in TAAS scores but also in a broad array of other measures, indicating that improved and more equitable school success for

students of color and students from low-income homes was not produced by simply teaching to a test. Who can argue with the importance of this critical step, given that a journey is never made in one move only?

Our findings, thus, suggest that accountability's displacement of deficit thinking for the study district superintendents was of major importance in moving the entire districts in a positive direction toward equity ideals. The superintendents in our study saw the accountability system as proving to them that their districts were *not* serving all children well. They also saw the state accountability system as picking up some of the potential local political cost of a large shift toward more educational equity in their districts. A third finding was that the accountability system forced these superintendents to seek out exemplars of academic success for children of color and children from low-income homes for the purpose of figuring out how their districts might accomplish the same. Fourth, our study indicated that the accountability system caused these superintendents to reevaluate their deficit-oriented views and then develop equity-oriented views. Finally, as they experienced academic success with students for whom they did not previously believe this was possible, as they experienced incremental success with these latter students, they year-by-year pushed expectations and goals higher and higher. However, we want to repeat once again that these superintendents and their districts had not reached democratic utopia, and they told us that themselves. They did, and are, bringing their districts much, much closer to the democratic ideal that all of us hold dear—truly high and equitable academic success for literally all children—and this substantial accomplishment should be recognized, respected, and researched so it can be used to help other superintendents move other school districts farther along the road to equitable democracy.

NOTES

1. Funding for the project was provided by the Sid W. Richardson Foundation, a private foundation located in Ft. Worth, Texas.

2. The criterion score used by the Texas Education Agency for these measures is 1,110 on SAT and 24 on ACT.

3. This test has a high level of difficulty; the percentage of all Texas students passing this test in 1999 was 43.4 (Texas Education Agency, 1999a).

4. The Recommended High School program requires students to take a more rigorous set of courses than the minimum high school program, including four credits of English, three credits of mathematics (Algebra, Geometry, Algebra II), three credits of science, four credits of social

studies and economics, two credits of the same language other than English, and a variety of other coursework including speech, technology applications, physical education, fine arts, and electives in specialized areas (Title 19 Texas Administrative Code, Part II, §74.12).

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