

---

# Foreword

A few months ago I was with a group of superintendents who were talking about their work and their lives. Having spent more than 30 years working as a superintendent myself or working for them in different capacities, I have a pretty good sense of the breed. One quality they share is a stoical restraint that tends to paper over their feelings and thoughts. They become very political when dealing with the outside world and emotionally closed when dealing with each other. There is a sense that vulnerability can lead to weakness and weakness spells doom.

It was in this context that I witnessed this particular discussion. So when one of the participants talked about what it feels like to go to sleep at night with your fist balled up under the pillow out of pain and the need to strike back, the words were raw and real. This acknowledgement of the pain and peril of leadership opened up the discussion and took it to a new and more honest level. It became clear that one of the first steps to resilience is to come clean about the pain you are feeling and to embrace it and release it.

During this same time frame I was sitting in the audience at the American Association of School Administrators National Conference on Education when one of our speakers, Dawna Markova, came on stage and announced that she had been thinking a lot about her superintendent audience and worrying a lot about them. She then asked a question that caused me to suck in my breath. She asked quite simply, "Who stands behind you?" She pointed out that as leaders they were expected to carry the load for their districts, bear the burdens of their staffs, and heal the needs of their children. They are asked to do this with inadequate resources and under sometimes hostile circumstances. So, in this context, who stands behind them?

The answer all too often is "no one."

School leadership bears a lot of similarities with other types of leaders. There is much to do and many responsibilities to perform, but the biggest

## x ● Balancing Leadership and Personal Growth

difference is that school leaders have responsibility without authority. In education, accountability is centralized, but authority is dispersed. They are in the eye of an accountability hurricane without shelter. They are expected to offset the problems created by society with inadequate resources and invisible support. And they must do this in public. They stand alone, in the center of the area, without swords or sidekicks. It is this public “aloneness” that sets the role apart from virtually any other that I know.

I discovered this “aloneness” the first few days I became a superintendent. I had served for three years as an assistant superintendent in a large district. I thought I understood the job of the superintendent pretty well. I had worked alongside the superintendent, had attended the board meetings, and had been a trusted confidant. Yet, when I took over a small but high-powered school district, I thought I was prepared. I discovered that the distance between the chairs of the assistant and the superintendent was much greater than the few feet that had separated our chairs at the board meeting. My whole world and perspective shifted. I was the spot where the buck stopped and there was no one there to pass it on to or anyone with whom to confide my fears.

Although I had heard my boss talked about on the radio, written about in the newspaper, and excoriated in public at board meetings, I had no idea what that would feel like when it was me standing in the crosshairs. This has led me, over the years, to collect various metaphors to describe what it feels like to be that target. I have likened the role to that of a piñata. You stand there and people gather around you and hit you with sticks, hoping something good falls out—and the people with sticks are blindfolded. Another metaphor is that the superintendent of schools bears the same relationship to the community as a fire hydrant bears to a dog—and in some of the places I worked they were running in packs. One of the best metaphors actually came from a board president who suggested that my role was to be a “quick-healing dartboard.” The most poignant came from Jonathan Kozol, who once suggested that cities needed school superintendents because they needed someone to die for their sins. It is no wonder then that superintendents and schools system leaders go to sleep with their fists balled up under their pillows.

In this context the search for the leader is a search for meaning. What would make it worth it? I have suggested that the answer lies in the mission itself: The question becomes whether the end is worth the price, and I believe it is. I have described the role as one of soul craft that creates value to those around it. It is true mission work because of what is at stake—the future of our country and the future of our children. Fire hydrants may serve as conveniences to the dogs, but they have a noble mission of protecting the community from harm. This is a noble and high calling. The destination justifies the journey.

But how does one survive the trip? That calls for marshalling your resources and creating a sense of balance in your life. This leads us to an assessment of what Christa Metzger calls the “inner state” of our being. We have to know ourselves, maintain an adequate supply of necessary resources—mental, physical, and spiritual. For leaders to care for others, they must first take care of themselves. And that is the point of the book you are about to read. It will give you tools for making the difficult daily journey of leadership.

When I was young there was a joke that went, “Sound mind, sound body; take your pick.” Well, as the Greeks reminded us, there is no picking between the two. They are interdependent. And I would argue for a third element which is just as critical: a sound soul. The task for leaders in any realm, but particularly for school leaders, is to maintain a sense of balance among the mind, soul, and body and create methods of refreshing and replenishing the wellsprings for these three elements of our being. And the other balance that is critical is that between our professional and personal selves. An imbalance here is like trying to ride a bicycle with one flat tire—it is hard and slow going, and it will wear you out. And being worn out will not allow you to lead. The only way we can pull our fist from underneath the pillow is by creating a sense of health that involves all aspects of our lives. This book should help.

Paul D. Houston  
Executive Director,  
American Association  
of School Administrators