

Douglas B. Reeves

Leadership for Student Empowerment

The energy generated when students take ownership of their learning is surprisingly similar across different education settings. I've witnessed this energy in two school districts that vary greatly in size and demographics: Hudson Public Schools in Massachusetts and Jefferson County Public Schools in Kentucky. What do these two districts have in common? Sheldon Berman, who served as superintendent in Hudson for 14

years and moved to Jefferson County in spring 2007. Berman is widely regarded as a national leader in service learning and student success.

Student Leadership in Hudson

During his tenure in Hudson Public Schools, a relatively small district with 2,800 students and six schools, Berman presided over a remarkable program that empowers students to become leaders in community service. When I visited Hudson, I found every student from kindergarten through high school engaging in service learning.

Community service is a mandatory part of the middle school and high school curriculum, and Hudson students take their service learning seriously. For example, one group of students combined their interests in Portuguese and environmental science by conducting annual trips to Brazil to study an endangered species of bats. Middle and high school science students took on the challenge of revitalizing a river that local authorities had declared dead; the river is now a vibrant habitat for local fish. An 8th grade class learned to knit from community volunteers and made hats that they donated to a homeless shelter. In a high school class, the students helped senior center residents come to

concerts at the school and also brought cultural events from the school to the senior centers.

Hudson also expects its students to participate actively in school decision making. For example, in a matter close to the hearts (and stomachs) of students, Hudson held schoolwide discussions about school meals. As a result, the district changed from using a traditional food-service model to using a school chef who, with student input, improved the quality and presentation of food. Students moved from mouthing the traditional complaints ("The food is crappy") to taking personal responsibility for improvement.

The district facilitates this kind of student involvement by dividing each school into clusters of 125 students and further dividing those clusters into student-selected interest groups of about 15 students, which meet weekly. Current examples of interest-group themes include children's literature, rocketry, the environment, and journalism. These groups are also the organizing structure for participation in cluster and schoolwide decision making. Students facilitate most of the group discussions.

Devoting time to these activities might seem risky for a district under pressure to raise standardized test scores. In fact, the results on Massachusetts state exams speak for themselves: Hudson has made significant gains in every area of achievement in the past seven years. In my interviews with students, teachers, and leaders, the level of commitment, engagement, and passion was among the highest I have seen.

A Commitment to Change in Jefferson

One of the most difficult questions in education is whether effective practices can be replicated more widely in different settings. Can the ideas that have been successful in Hudson be transplanted to a district with more than 99,000 students? That was the task that Sheldon Berman faced in spring 2007 when he became superin-



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tendent of Jefferson County Public Schools, an urban district in which 62 percent of students qualify for free or reduced-price lunch and 48 percent are ethnic minorities.

I asked Berman about the challenges of taking service learning and student empowerment from a small system to one of the largest districts in the United States. “The same things work,” he replied. “Empowerment and service learning actually make more of a difference in a large district.” And in an urban environment where equity issues are at the center of every leadership conversation, Berman feels it’s essential to counter students’ feelings of helplessness. “We address that by active engagement and social skills,” he said, “helping students see that they can make a difference doing meaningful work inside and outside of the classroom.”

Berman began by making significant efforts to create a climate in which student empowerment would thrive—for example, restructuring support for teachers so that they could take an inquiry approach to instruction. Early in his tenure, the district adopted an inquiry-based mathematics program. After a yearlong review with deep teacher involvement, 76 of 90 elementary schools adopted the new program the first year, and an additional eight will be added next year. At the high school level, 21 of 24 high schools adopted the Facing History and Our-

selves curriculum, which Berman recommended to give students a better understanding of their own responsibility in shaping history.

Jefferson County serves many students who are reading below grade level and need intensive intervention. The school district has dramatically expanded literacy services, but this focus on academics has not come at the expense of service learning. The district is restructuring social studies so that every 3rd grade classroom will work with a service organization in conjunction with the local United Way. “We want students to know that they make a difference,” Berman said.

Doesn’t large-scale systemic change take seven years? Berman laughed, reeling off the major changes that his colleagues have collaboratively implemented in fewer than 24 months: environmental magnet schools, university lab schools, new vocational curriculums for the high schools, performing arts in the elementary schools, more physical activity in the classroom, and international studies programs that will celebrate the cultural diversity of Jefferson County. As education leaders search for models of complex systemic change on a large scale, Jefferson County bears watching. **EL**

Douglas B. Reeves is Founder of the Leadership and Learning Center; 978-740-3001; DReeves@LeadAndLearn.com.

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