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Reframe Leadership to Reflect Realities, Culture of Schools, UMaine Professor Suggests in New Book

Kay Hyatt

College of Education & Human Development, University of Maine

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COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Selected News Releases

Reframe Leadership to Reflect Realities, Culture of Schools, UMaine Professor Suggests in New Book

ORONO, Maine – Practicing the effective leadership necessary for high-performing schools can be an elusive goal for administrators besieged with daily staff demands, increasing public expectations, complex bureaucratic regulations and constant building crises. The successful leader finds equally committed teachers, counselors and principals to share the load and rewards, says the author of a new book that emphasizes how to reframe leadership to fit the realities of schoolhouse life.

University of Maine Professor Gordon A. Donaldson, Jr. presents a fresh assessment of how schools operate and why traditional models of single-handed leadership don't work in his latest book, *Cultivating Leadership in Schools: Connecting People, Purpose, and Practice* (Teachers College Press, 2001).

In outlining conditions that strengthen or weaken common purpose and action, Donaldson offers practical pointers for principals and teacher leaders for forming more collaborative relationships, focusing on a shared vision and moving forward to improve their work with children and parents.

“Public schools present a very different milieu to lead in than the corporate sector,” says Donaldson, professor of educational leadership in UMaine's College of Education and Human Development. The school staff is busy with students and can't be expected to drop teaching or counseling to deal with leadership or organizational issues, he explains. “In short, school leaders simply don't have ready access to the people they are attempting to lead.”

This reality underscores the need to mobilize, trust and encourage people to build relationships among themselves, rather than depending on one person to bring them all together, says Donaldson, a former public school teacher and principal.

American public schools function more on moral conviction and professional judgment than on tightly prescribed goals and technical rationality, and the citizen can potentially influence policy more than the educator, Donaldson writes. He explains that educators have long approached their work as a calling rooted not just in passing on knowledge but in nurturing the good in children.

The practice of education has a moral purpose – making sure schools are serving the best interest of children in a society of competing ideas and resources. But too many agendas and stakeholders pulling in different directions can easily deflect the loftiest mission, Donaldson cautions.

“If leadership is to mobilize the school for educational reform, it must accommodate this fundamental moral reality and strike a chord with teachers' deepest sense of calling,” he says.

Teachers' attentions are riveted within their classroom and their immediate work with children, Donaldson points out. Their willingness to become engaged in leadership's agendas will hinge on how a long-range issue will affect their success with students today.

The principal's role, according to Donaldson, is to create an open environment where people can say what they think, then most educators will join in and take the leap toward changing practice together.

Donaldson's model is premised on leadership as a relationship among people that can mobilize them to accomplish purposes they value. It capitalizes on teachers' powerful sense of professional community that shapes their practice and relationships to one another. This "professional tribalism" brings teachers together beyond the reach of principals and often of teacher leaders, according to Donaldson.

Presenting theory, practical examples and action steps, Donaldson examines three streams of activity that influence collaborative leadership: a relationship of mutual openness, trust and affirmation; commitment to valued purposes; and a shared belief in action in common. He emphasizes that leadership must be purposive, active and targeted toward results.

"If we do not reframe leadership to reflect the busy landscape of school life realities, we will continue to count an alarming number of communities and faculties who have become critical or cynical about their formal school leaders," says Donaldson. "Tragically, we will also count a growing number of principals and teacher leaders who give up on leadership and a similar trend among capable teachers to eschew a future in school leadership altogether."

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Contact: Kay Hyatt, (207) 581-2761

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