

# Prologue

## *A Cautionary Tale*

We begin this book with a cautionary tale—a day in the life of an educational leader, the day Don found out that the board of education no longer needed or wanted his services as superintendent of schools. (Don is a composite of several superintendents we have interviewed.)

Until the past several months, Don had lived what may be described as a charmed life. Fifteen years ago, he started his first teaching job in a small high school. The first day at school, he almost instinctively did something that surprised even himself: He sat down at his desk and wrote, in large print, *Donald S. Brown, Superintendent of Schools*. Somewhat puzzled at this bold move, Don thought back to why he became an educator in the first place. He was actively involved in athletics, student government, and social activities while a student in high school. One of his coaches, who later became a superintendent, took a real interest in Don and encouraged him to become a teacher. This male superintendent was certainly a role model for Don.

Don got his first teaching job in the high school where he did his student teaching. His principal, aware of Don's interest in and potential for administration, gave him unofficial assignments around the school that prepared him for an assistant principalship. For example, Don supervised the parking lot in the morning and after school and handled some discipline situations. After three years of teaching, Don was assigned an assistant principalship in a junior high school, where he served for two years. An

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elementary school principalship came open, and Don, despite his reluctance to be an administrator at a level where he hadn't taught, accepted the position and was considered a quick study, with high credibility among his staff.

Two years later, the high school principal retired and Don was named the new principal. After two years on the job, Don succeeded the superintendent of schools, who took early retirement for health reasons. At this time, Don began work on his doctorate in education at a nearby university. This gave him an instant support system outside the school system and a place to express and hear the ideas and feelings of administrators in similar positions. It also introduced Don to new ways of looking at leadership. He was especially interested in the *know thyself* theme within educational leadership courses. He had been primarily task oriented in making his way up the ladder and had taken little time to be introspective. He shared the following in a letter to one of his professors a few weeks after his first semester of doctoral studies:

I enjoyed your class this last semester and have been reflecting on your book and my personal and professional life. I qualify that statement with "sometimes," because you well know that this reflective thinking can be very uncomfortable at times. I get so intent on managing a school system and trying to get everything done that I lose sight of what's important—wanting to be where I am, and the importance of my relationships with others. One of the "curses" of my experience in administration is that I don't take much time to reflect—thank you for reminding me how vital that time is.

In doctoral study, Don was introduced to critical theory, with its emphasis on critique and the injustices society can impose on its citizens. Mainly, Don came to understand the interactions between the inner self and context. He was surprised that some of his easy solutions to societal problems, such as "All you have to do is pull yourself up by your bootstraps," were mechanisms that supported his extreme optimism and denial of how much some people struggle to keep body and soul together. The gift to Don in

the early stages of this transformation was that he was less judgmental and self-righteous. The challenge was that he lost some of the comfort and security that come with thinking that he could control people and situations in his own interest.

Don's 4-year stay in this system as superintendent of schools was by all accounts highly successful. His outgoing and personable leadership style gave him high scores among students, teachers, other members of the staff, parents, and members of the community. Don also inherited a very talented central office staff that had a sense of vision as well as a sophisticated assessment system for administrators, teachers and, students. One of his assistant superintendents had a doctorate in educational research. Richard Jaeger was her advisor and, through his mentorship, she was given the opportunity to study under Michael Scriven, John Hattie, and Robert Stake. Consequently, when federal and state legislation was introduced, Don's assistant superintendent was able to keep the best of the assessment system she and her staff developed while at the same time accommodating new accountability mandates and high-stakes testing requirements. In short, she knew her stuff, and Don, once again a quick study, learned the language and procedures of evaluation and measurement. Both Don and his assistant superintendent kept the school board up-to-date on such matters.

After four years as a superintendent, Don received an offer to become superintendent of a large urban school system in the state. He did this despite recent knowledge in doctoral study about the average tenure of urban superintendents—2.5 years (Renchler, 1992)—in contrast to the mean tenure for large and small districts combined—6.47 years (Glass, 1992).

Don was initially elated with his new assignment. A few months into the superintendency, however, he experienced a sense of loss about leaving his previous school system that really surprised him. In fact, he felt blindsided by this empty feeling. He discovered, in conversations with his wife and colleagues in doctoral study, that he was not alone in having this feeling after accepting a new assignment. They too went through a brief feeling of depression in their new positions. Informal discussions

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helped Don see that he felt this sense of emptiness for not having completed the job he started when he had promised others he would continue into a second term.

A split board had released the former superintendent at the end of his four-year contract. Don had the full support of five of the seven board members during his first year—his honeymoon period. He was aware, however, that his position was vulnerable when two of his supporters on the board were defeated at the polls and two outspoken conservatives replaced them.

At this time, the board meetings became heated over a number of controversial issues: sex education, magnet schools, charter schools, redistricting, and the use of the high school by clubs whose agendas disturbed special interest groups in the community. Don did his best to achieve consensus on difficult issues, but one issue was not negotiable in his value system: the resegregation of the school system, something that was the result of magnet schools, the placement of new neighborhood school buildings, and the community's reluctance to engage in busing for desegregation purposes. Don was outspoken about his views on integration and desegregation in statements to the press and on television.

Unlike in his former school system, Don inherited a central office staff that had completely decentralized the assessment of teachers and students. Don's predecessor was a relatively weak leader whose principals thrived on the power bases they built. They gave little attention to the assessment of teachers and students, and some even engaged in testing irregularities that led to one principal's being forced into early retirement. As the state and federal governments became more active in mandating accountability measures and high-stakes testing, the central office tried to catch up with acceptable assessment systems. Several schools in the system were placed on probation by the state, and the local newspaper and television station had a field day with test results released by the state.

Don's wife and two children began to feel hostility from some members of the community, and crank phone calls in the middle of the night had his family anxious for their safety. At this time, an investigative reporter wrote a scathing article about what were

claimed to be Don's financial practices. The article pointed out that the superintendent placement services that the board employed, what the reporter called "headhunters," had in turn been hired by Don as consultants to align the curriculum after he became superintendent. The reporter also uncovered the fact that Don served as a consultant for this placement and consulting firm on occasion.

At this time, Don and his wife had their first encounter with the reality that "bad things can happen to good people." Their third child died of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). Until this time, Don had been "on the arc of optimism." His worth was defined in his own mind by performance-based acceptance: He felt his worth depended on his acceptance by others. He had "jumped through the hoops" or "gone over the hurdles" in a highly efficient way, with promotion following promotion. Don realized that he had been conditioned to be reactive and analytical. He didn't know how to get in touch with his feelings, but instead was everything to everybody but himself.

With the convergence of the loss of a child at home and the possible loss of his position as superintendent of schools in a large urban system, Don felt he was on a downward spiral. His impulse was to work faster and harder, something that had worked to his advantage in the past. But in the process of following this impulse, he found it difficult to focus and at times felt a kind of claustrophobia in stressful meetings. Cynicism entered his life and conversations. Before, he had talked about the necessity of risk taking and the excitement of "living on the edge." He now said on occasions, "Being a leader makes it possible for people to hate you." And he somewhat humorously said that administration is "being responsible for irresponsible people . . . who seem to be having a lot more fun that you are having." In short, Don was fatigued from overwork and conflict, and some of his basic assumptions about his leadership in particular and life in general were being seriously challenged. Don reminded himself that some of his best classes in doctoral study taught him that one of the things that happens when a person changes is that he or she feels there is an inverted world order: You start to look at things as if they are upside down.

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The church Don and his family attended was assigned a minister whom Don came to respect as a pastor and friend. A message new to Don was being preached from the pulpit: “You are loved for who you are, not simply what you do.” Don was reminded of a leadership class in his doctoral study that made a distinction between spiritual power and political power, a point driven home by Don’s reading of M. Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Traveled* (1978) and Gloria Steinem’s *Revolution From Within* (1992). Don’s new minister repeatedly reminded the congregation that one’s doing is but part of one’s being, and who we are consists of many things that are not necessarily visible to others in what we do: our potential and basic assumptions about reality. For example, Don realized that defining our worth by simply getting the approval of others is a dead-end street; our doing is important but not all-important.

Don recognized that looking good through high standardized test scores and appearing to be a winner by bringing in grant money are not enough. Creative leadership is not getting people to do what you want them to do, regardless of whether they want to do it: Rather, creative leadership is using your talents to help others identify and use their talents and, in the process, trying to achieve worthwhile goals and objectives. Don sensed with every fiber of his being that he was involved in a struggle that had no easy answers—a struggle symbolized in two dreams he felt demonstrated the difference between his “old self” and his “new self.”

When Don graduated from college and began his upward career ascent, he had a dream that grew out of his experiences living in a three-bedroom house as a child. He described the bathroom in this house as never having a cold seat because his mother, father, brother, sister, or grandmother always seemed to be in the bathroom when he needed to use it. Grandma was a special problem, as she liked to take hour-long baths. Don’s dream was that he had just built a beautiful five-bedroom, three-bathroom house in the suburbs and was now challenged to find the very best furniture, carpeting, and so on to furnish the place. Don loved this dream, had it repeatedly, and shared it with those close to him

who found it quite amusing in the telling—especially because Don and his family now had such a house in his second superintendency.

Don's new dream, which he had had only two or three times, was far less romantic and was, in fact, disquieting. He dreamed that their two children had left home and that he and his wife had purchased a smaller house that had already been owned by other occupants. The home was messy, and no matter how much Don and his wife tried to make the house like a new home, they couldn't turn it into a perfectly clean new house with everything in its proper place. Don and his wife laughed about these two dreams and how their efforts to control everything with their lives in general and their children in particular simply hadn't worked. Given the depression both Don and his wife were experiencing at this time in their lives, they humorously referred to themselves as "Numb and Number." (In fact, seeing the humorous side of things made them understand that they were slowly working themselves out of this state of depression.)

It is with this background in mind that we return to the day when Don received word that his services as superintendent of schools were no longer needed. Actually, receiving word wasn't exactly how it happened. Following the seething article, along with staff and community knowledge of the increasingly strained relationship between Don and his board, rumors of Don's impending firing began to circulate—first among staff and then in isolated pockets of the community. As it turned out, Don's opposition on the board had been talking out-of-school about their views that the superintendent was going to have to go. Had it not been for a call-in radio talk show, Don would have been totally blindsided. However, when a telephone guest inquired as to the truth of the rumor that the superintendent was going to be fired, Don's phone rang off the hook for the next hour and a half.

Fifteen minutes into the frenzy of calls, Don summoned one of his two most trusted staff members, Margaret Kahn. Margaret said that she had heard rumblings among some top staff a few days earlier, but had completely dismissed them as rumors. She indicated that, due to all the stress Don was undergoing on the job,

she simply saw no need to burden him with what she was certain was a rumor. Now, they both knew that with this much smoke, there had to be a fire somewhere.

Don didn't have to wait long. Shortly before noon, Don received a call from his very supportive board chair, who appeared to be devastated. Jim Fick had just been told by one of Don's critics on the board that he had acquired enough support in the last week to not only not renew Don's contract, but also to buy out his final year. Furthermore, the critic requested an executive session for Thursday night, just two days away, to discuss this with the entire board.

The rest is history. What followed was a Thursday night executive session of the board in which three of Don's seven board members couldn't believe their ears about the criticism of Don's work and three were in such an emotional state that they would have written personal checks to get the superintendent out. The seventh board member could have gone either way, but with her political support base tied to Don's critics, and with this being an election year, she cast her vote to terminate. Don was called into the executive session and advised that in a few minutes the board would go into public session and place him on administrative leave until the details of his contract buyout could be worked out.

Don was told to remove his personal belongings by 5:00 p.m. the next day. Talk of legal fees, emotional wars, and staff, family, and community unrest proliferated in the area all day Friday and over the weekend. Sunday's newspaper headline read, "School Board Fires Superintendent." The amazing but predictable post-firing discussions never included anything about Don's alleged incompetence as a practicing administrator. Emotions ran high, however, when his views on maintaining racially integrated schools entered the discussion. The community split on this issue, and Don's value system left him without a job and him and his family in emotional upheaval. (Rarely does an intellectual issue lead to derailment in the superintendency; however, emotional and political conditions usually expedite the process.)

Don and his wife had such mixed feelings when the dust settled and they entered the buyout year. They appreciated those



loyal friends who had supported them through one of the most difficult times in their lives, and they remained angry with those who had wanted Don's termination. Losing the job was for Don like the death of a friend: He didn't know how to grieve. His relationship with his minister was helpful, and this friend, realizing the extent of Don's depression, helped him get help from a professional therapist, a counseling psychologist. Fortunately, Don had maintained his health coverage as part of termination negotiations. During this time, it crossed Don's mind that he might have to leave home for a brief period of time to have around-the-clock psychological support, but this didn't come to pass. His therapist helped Don see that he had developed coping skills during the past few years that in fact kept him from making real and necessary changes in his life. Don recognized that he occasionally had the "false flu," and allergy attacks had become more and more prevalent. On occasion, he would be bedridden for two or three afternoons a week.

During this year, Don realized that completing his doctoral program was a godsend. It gave him structure, a goal, and a support network of professors and students. Most important, it gave him an arena away from his former school system in which he could be successful. The buyout year was a year of reflections and action, a year during which Don and his family could decide what to do next.

The story of Don's derailment raises several questions that may stimulate discussion:

1. What mistakes did Don make and what would you have done to avoid these mistakes? (We refer to this as the *personal face* of derailment.)
2. What did you respect or admire about Don's decision making in this career path story and why?
3. What mistakes did the school system make in relating to Don and what would you have done to avoid these mistakes. (We refer to this as the *organizational face* of derailment.)

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4. What did you respect or admire about those in the school system, including board members, as they related to Don in this narrative and why?
5. What vocational options are now open to Don, and what advice would you give him and why?

Your answers to these questions make it clear why we introduced this section by calling it a cautionary tale: Staying on track is an important goal for the person (in this case, Don), for others, and for the organization as a whole. The educational leader who proceeds with caution must be alert and prudent. It is our aim in this book to help you develop these qualities of leadership.

Note: See Cases 1 through 5 in the Resources section at the end of this book for a discussion of issues related to Don's journey from assistant principal to superintendent.