

Viewpoint

He who has the most toys wins! You've heard variations of this quip a hundred times and smiled at it each time.

Now imagine a play entitled, *He Who Graduates the Most Students Wins!* The setting is the start of the 21st century. The genre is catastrophe and it's aftermath. The United States is facing the impending disaster and the dire personal and economic consequences of hundreds of thousands of young people dropping out of school each year and a graduation rate hovering at 70%.

Federal legislation to assure no child is left behind is created. However, the legislation is widely criticized for lacking the resources to accomplish its goal. So where is our protagonist? Who will lead the way for every child to succeed and avert the catastrophe? The audience is riveted. Enter, stage right, the Superintendent.

"The world's a stage," goes a well-known proverb, "and every man plays his part." Center stage in this play of dropout prevention stands the superintendent. He wears no flowing cape, he possesses no supernatural powers. All about him swarm a myriad of challenges that thicken the plot. The audience wonders how one human being can possibly make a

Effective superintendents believe that they can make a difference and that the interests of children must be paramount in our schools.

difference. Yet, the audience quickly discovers that the superintendent is a roll-up-your-sleeves type. Effective superintendents believe that they can make a difference and that the interests of children must be paramount in our schools. While under increasing pressure to produce good report cards, image is not the overriding motivation of superintendents—children are.

Leadership is an elusive and evasive term. When we think we have it captured, it escapes and transforms itself into something else. It is a set of principles, a listing of traits. It is too often defined as one person at the helm of an organization. Certainly, strong leadership of this type is important. The headless horseman school district leader will not thrive in today's politically charged environment. But executive leadership alone will not cause lasting reform in a school district.

Strong executive leadership—the leadership of the superintendent—is needed to create an environment that accepts the need for fundamental change and grows leadership that can drive change.

The call for change resounds across the history of education in our country. To avert today's catastrophe, top leadership must advocate fundamental change. Superintendents like our protagonist, who are taking on the cause of adapting systems to children, know it is the one thing that will change education fundamentally for the good of each student, family, community, and our nation. Walking a fine line between the expectation of image and performance, they are coming down in increasing numbers on the side of performance. As a result, their image is enhanced.

So how does our play end? When *He Who Graduates the Most Students Wins* is the competition, fundamental change occurs, the catastrophe is avoided, and we all win. The audience applauds as the superintendent exits, stage left. A sequel is in the making.

—Dr. Sam Drew is the
Associate Director of the
National Dropout Prevention Center



National Dropout Prevention Center/Network

NEWSLETTER

College of Health, Education, and Human Development, Clemson University
209 Martin Street, Clemson, South Carolina 29631-1555

Nonprofit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Permit No. 10
Clemson, SC