

WALKING the EQUITY TALK

A Guide for

CULTURALLY COURAGEOUS LEADERSHIP

in School Communities

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About the Author



John Robert Browne II is an education consultant and executive coach who specializes in developing culturally courageous systems and collaborative leadership for achieving equity and excellence. Dr. Browne has conducted training on instructional leadership or multicultural education for four state departments of education and was the national lead consultant and trainer on effective school reform for the Bureau of Indian Affairs. He was the recipient of a Ford Foundation fellowship to complete

his doctorate in education at the University of Massachusetts in Amherst, specializing in curriculum and organization studies. He was a participant in the Washington Internships in Education program, where he served as a staff associate for the National Council for the Social Studies and traveled the country studying the interface between federal, state, and local policy on desegregation and educational innovations.

Dr. Browne taught at the junior or senior high level in Columbus, Ohio (his home town), Hartford, Connecticut, and Huntington, New York. He was an education administrator for 23 years, with administrative responsibility for curriculum, integration, school choice, and leadership development programs. His work included administrative assignments in the San Diego County Office of Education and in San Diego Unified, and he was also the assistant superintendent for instruction at the Grant Joint Union High School District in Sacramento, California. More recently, he served as an external evaluator and consultant for several state-designated low-performing schools throughout California. Browne has also been an adjunct lecturer in teacher education, multicultural education, organizational and leadership effectiveness, and Africana studies at five universities in southern California at the undergraduate, master's, and doctorate levels. For more than a decade, his work and research have focused primarily on the politics of urban education.

DISTRICT-LEVEL ACTIONS

HELPING SCHOOL SITES EMBRACE THE "5 A'S"

Tony Lamair Burks II was an area superintendent in the San Diego Unified School District. He was responsible for two high school clusters, which included 27 elementary, middle, or high schools. His schools were populated by some of the most culturally, socioeconomically, racially, and linguistically diverse students in the school district.

A major intervention related to the 5 A's was Dr. Burks's rolling out the Board of Education's community-based school reform model in his administrative area. A major purpose of the reform model is to organically develop and sustain strategic community engagement efforts through cluster councils. This work began with the creation of councils that include community members and parents as well as representatives from a high school and their feeder elementary and middle schools.

The overarching goal of the reform model is for each council to improve cluster communication, coordination, and development, resulting in a cohesive preK–12 environment that provides a quality education for all students.

Each cluster council decides what strategies it will employ to collectively improve or enhance the quality of education provided in cluster schools. Dr. Burks jump-started the work of his cluster councils by visiting his schools and initially talking to site administrators about what needed to change or be improved. By their own acknowledgement, principals said they were not in classrooms enough. Based on these instances of informal dialogue, Dr. Burks then distributed a comprehensive survey to all stakeholders in each cluster in their native language. The results of the survey were used by Dr. Burks to develop a shared vision for the area that included increasing the time administrators spend in classrooms, as well as coaching faculty and staff in promising practices.

A change was made in the focus of most administrative observations from evaluation to opportunities for feedback, coaching, and instructional improvement. In addition to whatever cluster councils decide to focus upon, Dr. Burks took the initiative in his area to provide The Breakthrough Coach, a professional development seminar, for all school administrators within his administrative area. Principals and their secretaries attended the 2-day seminar to learn best practices for using administrative support, organizing schools to produce break-throughs in student achievement, and observing instruction multiple times each week. He developed a master plan for follow-up support and coaching. The master plan included an ongoing focus on improving communication and problem solving within and across school sites.

Burks brought in Dr. Joseph E. Johnson, whose work was discussed in Chapter 11, to conduct interactive presentations on “teaching and leading in high performing urban schools” for all of Burks’s school site administrators who brought teachers and community representatives. Dr. Burks laid a foundation for his administrators, administrative support staff, and site teacher leadership teams to develop a critical consciousness, become better organized, and have a common language. Chart 12b lists some of the conditions identified by Johnson and Chenoweth that were being modeled by Burks in preparation for more widespread cluster collaboration on achieving high-performing schools.

There were some major challenges to the goals Dr. Burks established for improving the focus on instructional leadership in his 27 school sites. One challenge was how to blunt the major impact of severe cuts in the district budget, necessitated by the state’s huge deficit. He confronted some district norms related to the district being very compliance driven even when it is at the expense of what is in the best interests of students. He is very student-centered and expected his site administrators to walk that talk, inspecting what they expect, as he does. When he approved a principal’s request to make adjustments in the school’s time schedule, the office of pupil accounting told the principal he couldn’t do it. Dr. Burks had to confront this office and others so they wouldn’t continue blocking what the principal wanted to do to improve the educational outcomes of students. What he found was that all of the

Chart 12b Examples of the 5 A's Modeled by a District Administrator

Visited classrooms frequently to gauge student learning. Constantly sought evidence that students are learning what their teachers are teaching.
(Used) . . . data to examine what's not working and make changes in every area
Organized outside mentors, volunteers, local service organizations, social service agencies, colleges, and companies for specific help.
Encouraged teachers to build upon students' interests, backgrounds, cultures, and prior knowledge.
Powerful collaborations were fostered that made individuals feel supported and valued. These collaborations led to a strong sense of efficacy: a feeling that "together, we can accomplish anything!"
Pushed beyond compliance and encouraged everyone to embrace goals that will make a difference in students' lives.
Collected information that helped him know how to improve relational issues. Identified and resolved issues promptly and professionally.
Used research and data to focus on opportunities to improve, not on reasons to blame.
Created platforms for the leadership of many others who want to influence school improvement.
Understood the power of mutual respect.

district fanfare about being committed to community-based school reform was more talk than walk if efforts were made to change long established district practices.

Soon after assuming his assignment as area superintendent, Dr. Burks lobbied the board of education and superintendent for differentiated financial support to his two high school clusters that were not receiving an equitable share of district funds based on student academic needs and the average daily attendance when compared with other high school clusters. He started changing other long-standing norms, engaging principals in talking about their successes and failures, and being resources to each other. After The Breakthrough Coach training, Dr. Burks served as a coach helping them to implement what they learned. He also announced to all appropriate district persons, such as cabinet members, that his principals should not be expected to attend any meetings before 1:00 p.m. so they could devote more time to being in classrooms during prime instructional hours. All parents were also sent a letter with the same message that they shouldn't expect to have access to principals during most of the school day because the first priority was principals being in classrooms.

Dr. Burks also started coaching his principals on how to engage in rigorous supervision of teachers who consistently display questionable instructional performance. His game plan was to first facilitate everyone developing a common language, followed by getting all to give high priority to getting in classrooms much more frequently, and then engaging in conversations about what needs to be different than what they observed. He also recognized the quality of professional development must dramatically improve if teachers were going to be held accountable for utilizing what they have learned.

At the same time, Dr. Burks began his process for enhancing principal instructional supervision competencies, partially through joint visits to classrooms with his principals. He also asked each principal to identify two teachers whose classroom he could visit on his own, with one being a person perceived by the principal as an effective teacher, and one whose instruction was perceived as needing major improvement. Discussions with the principal followed these observations.

Tony Burks told his principals that he envisioned them *servicing* as chief executive officers of their schools; *making* decisions that are in the best interest of their students; *functioning* as experts who monitor and observe teaching and learning, *utilizing* data-differentiated decision making and decision management; *exercising* creativity and responsibility with financial resources; *engaging* parents, guardians, students, community members, and service organizations in various ways; and *capitalizing* on the gifts, talents, and experiences of fellow administrators through communication and collaboration.

In an era of drastic budget cutting, another of the challenges experienced in schools populated to a large extent by limited or non-English speakers was how to provide translation services in community meetings and how to send out information or make calls to students' homes in the appropriate language. Despite the challenge, Dr. Burks was able to secure such services through the acquisition of start-of-the-art equipment that provides translation in three languages simultaneously.

Burks also found the time to personally mentor a group of high school males of color, called the "Crew," checking up on the good things they were doing, much to the students' dismay. Many of them have at times been labeled as disengaged, disruptive, and disrespectful, but they have dispelled these mythical labels, living up to the high expectations placed upon them. Through these activities and priorities, Dr. Burks demonstrated the 5 A's in chart 12b.

In one of his high school clusters, there are a large number of students recently immigrated from the African continent who haven't been in schools for years and are now experiencing resettlement in the United States. A different level of support was needed and Dr. Burks sought to make sure such support was provided to these students.

Dr. Burks, through his leadership of site leaders and inclusive outreach to all stakeholders in his schools and their school communities, definitely demonstrated the essential role of district offices to support the journey of school sites toward practice of the 5 A's. Nevertheless, using the rationale of a need for massive cuts to district administrative staff, the board of education chose to reorganize the supervisorial structure of the district after less than a year of implementation. The board voted to reduce the number of area superintendents from 10 to 6.

Although Dr. Burks applied for one of the six positions, he was one of the four area superintendents whose services were terminated, even though he had given 3 years of exemplary service at the district level, which was documented in writing by the district superintendent. Currently, in addition to serving as the superintendent-in-residence at the National Center for Urban School Transformation (NCUST) at San

Diego State University, he recently assumed the position of transformation coach in the North Carolina department of public instruction, as part of the roll out of their federal government “race to the top” grant. However, he continues to serve as a consultant to school districts for NCUST, helping further its mission of working with urban school districts and their partners. The goals of NCUST are to transform urban schools into places where all students achieve academic proficiency, evidence a love of learning, and graduate well prepared to succeed in postsecondary education, the workplace, and their communities. Burks is working with both the North Carolina department of public instruction and the NCUST leadership team to accelerate and sustain school transformation.

Dr. Burks’ layoff is an illustration of a major problem in urban school districts that terminate both teachers and administrators who demonstrate the commitment and skills to make significant progress in facilitating movement toward equitable educational outcomes. When people like Dr. Burks have done exemplary work as indicated by the statements of those they supervise, the public, and the district superintendent, it is critical that boards of education and district superintendents demonstrate the political courage and insight to do whatever is necessary to maintain as much continuity as possible in retaining proven winners.

MAKE IT PERSONAL

FN12-1 (SEE FACILITATOR NOTES IN APPENDIX 1)

1. From reading the two leadership profiles, describe three understandings you acquired about how culturally courageous leadership can be manifested in school communities.
2. What can you apply from the leadership profiles to your own work context?



SIMILIARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

There are several similarities between the major players discussed in this chapter. Both Dr. Hollie and Dr. Burks strongly articulate a compelling vision, which is influenced by their knowledge of community, parent, staff, and student priorities/concerns. They also share what they envision to their entire school community, and demonstrate commitment to the vision through their priorities, modeling, and coaching of others. Both are very student-centered and knowledgeable of research-based best practices for administrators and teachers. In each of their situations, they experienced challenges related to district or school deficits and budget cuts, and in response, made a strong case to policymakers for more equitable approaches. In each