**Principal Cases**

**21st Century Initiatives: Seasoned Principals and 21st Learning**

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**Abstract**

This case was developed to highlight how school leaders tackle tremendous challenges when developing and implementing new initiatives in a schools and/or districts that have long histories of underachieving minority populations. The narrative details the underlining complexities that school leaders encounter on a daily basis when implementing a new program in a district that has pressure from the community and state to develop a structure to support student academic success. Instructors can use the case to develop discussions on the practical use of evaluating the case study through the lens of structures, human resource, symbolism, and political framework. This will allow the reader to further analyze one case study through various insights that one can implement as an educational leader.

**Keywords**

educational leadership, school districts, online learning, program implementation, 21st century

**Case Narrative**

The principal, Dr. Gabe Kotter, stood in hallway as the last of his students, who he nicknamed his sweat hogs, walked out the school. He stood thinking, “Wow, there goes the last of my sweat hogs, I hope that Vinnie stays out of trouble this summer.” Although he was only the student’s principal for the current year, Dr. Kotter grew fond of his students and was thrilled that many of them were able to graduate this year despite the challenges they were presented with on a daily basis. After all students departed the school, Dr. Kotter turned around and slowly walked to his office. Once in his office, he took a deep breath and fell into his chair. He thought to himself, “Man this year flew by,” and began to reflect on his first year at the newly opened Rydell Online Campus (ROC) – an online campus for students at Lake Forest High School.

The ROC was created as a solution to the district’s problem of repeated declines in graduation rates. The superintendent believed that the ROC would be able to accommodate students in challenging situations and promised the community that the new 2 million dollar online campus would help increase graduation rates for the district. In the first year of operations, there were many great accomplishments as it related to student achievement. However, although there were many successful outcomes, Dr. Kotter recognized that, as principal, he needed to improve some of the structures currently in place in order to maximize student success. Too, Dr. Kotter acknowledged the superintendent was awaiting a call to discuss the end-of-year results for the ROC. While he continued to reflect on the year, he wondered how he should structure the conversation with his superintendent. Should he honestly report the flaws and challenges related to the program? Should he disclose the underhanded interventions he used to ensure the students graduated? Should he mention that he had to extend the classes into the summer for students who had courses that were incomplete without central office approval?

Dr. Kotter debated if he should tell the superintendent what he wanted to hear or if he should be honest. Honesty was the approach he wanted to take, however, he knew his superintendent. He knew what his superintendent wanted to hear. He took a deep breathe, picked up the phone, dialed his superintendent’s phone number, and said, “Boss, we need to talk.”

**Brooklyn Public Schools**

Meeting the needs of every student has always been and continues to be one of the biggest points of pride for Brooklyn Public Schools (BPS). Historically, BPS has provided educational opportunities to the most diverse student population[[1]](#footnote-1) in New York. In BPS there are 15 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, and 1 high school. As a result, all students in BPS attend Lake Forest High School for grades 9-12. Due to the increase in enrollment throughout the district, in the last seven years, Lake Forest High has reached enrollments as high as 3,500 students. As a result, the district has developed separate campuses of Lake Forest High in order to reduce the large student population and better manage operations within the district’s only high school.

The first separate campus developed for Lake Forest High was called the Degrassi Campus. The Degrassi Campus was designed for all Lake Forest High ninth graders. Although the ninth grade students are at a separate location from the “main” campus, students continue to have access to support services (e.g., The Teen Wellness Clinic and College and Career Center) and extracurricular activities (e.g., student clubs and sports) at Lake Forest High. In addition to the Degrassi Campus, Lake Forest High also has a separate campus called the Bayside Campus. The Bayside Campus serves as an alternative school for Lake Forest High students with severe behavior concerns.

It is known in BPS that the traditional way of delivering education doesn’t work for every student. At Lake Forest High, many student’s struggle academically or dropout. Additionally, some of the students at Lake Forest High are missing days of school because of family obligations such as: work, caring for siblings while their parents work, childcare (teen parents), mental health concerns, and various other issues. There have been numerous interventions implemented to support student learning and success across BPS, but they have not proven to be successful. This is why the new Rydell Online Campus (ROC) was created.

**Rydell Online Campus (ROC)**

The Rydell Online Campus (ROC), was developed with one thing in mind: Student Success! The ROC is a flexible, non-traditional, 21st century learning environment that provides an opportunity to meet the needs of Lake Forest High School students by offering online courses ranging from credit recovery courses[[2]](#footnote-2) to acceleration courses[[3]](#footnote-3). Too, the ROC delivers a 21st-century curriculum that is flexible in scheduling and student-centered in support. The ROC prepares students to compete in the global marketplace with a down-to-earth approach that recognizes the challenges students may face in completing their high school education. At the ROC, staff recognize the realities many student’s encounter as well as the barriers that prevent some from getting their diplomas or graduating with a strong future. It is also known that, for many, school responsibilities conflict with the demands and needs of family life outside of school.

The ROC staff is comprised of highly motivated, highly skilled, energetic, creative, and technologically savvy professionals. At the ROC, the staff develops measures that address student motivation, discipline, and lack of parental support. Staff supports student achievement by working closely with students, families, teachers, mentors, and the community to ensure student’s benefit from all of the services that are available through BPS. Administrators, teachers, and support staff at the ROC work one-on-one with students and are committed to knowing students as people and learners while also maintaining an unending belief that all students can achieve at high levels.

Some of the features of the ROC include:

• Daily access to online and blended learning instruction and support

• Extended School Hours (Monday-Friday 8:00am-8:00pm, and Saturdays 10:00am-5:30)

• Individual instruction plans from certified teachers

• Streamlined programs targeted towards earning a high school diploma

• Self-paced online courses that prepare students for college

• Attentive academic support

• Career preparation counseling and Mental Health Support[[4]](#footnote-4)

**The Principal of the ROC**

Dr. Kotter is a veteran teacher (middle and high school) and the only administrator with 23 years of principal experience in Brooklyn Public Schools. Dr. Kotter has worked in Shermer Middle School, Hill Valley Middle School, Ridgemont Middle School, and Lake Forest High School. Dr. Kotter, principal of the Rydell Online Campus, acquired his Doctorate from Cooley University. Following the completion of his doctorate, he continued his studies at the University of New Orleans, South University, and Rogue University. In BPS, he is currently involved in standards-based education training, school reform planning, instructional review, College Board-Springboard, assessment development, and reading and writing improvement initiatives. His past experiences include: administrative recruiting, interviewing, hiring, supervising, and evaluating administrative, instructional, and support staff. And, for the state of New York, Dr. Kotter was responsible for the implementation of the International Baccalaureate Program and Magnet Schools curricula in urban, suburban and rural settings.

Dr. Kotter enjoys working with challenging learners, parents, faculty, staff, school partners, stakeholders and other members of the community. Beyond his work as a principal, Dr. Kotter serves as a mentor for "at promise" youths and volunteers his services through the Shelter Care Home School program, Young Stars Success mentoring program, and Heritage Fellowship Church Board of Directors. In addition, he has been awarded for his involvement with the American Red Cross, Big Brothers Mentoring Association, Youth Urban League, and the "Untouchables" Tutoring (parents and youths) program in Brooklyn. Many of Dr. Kotter’s associates and former students consistently keep in touch with him and have accomplished successful careers in life.

**The Culture of Rydell Online Campus**

Brooklyn Pubic Schools’ selection of, the seasoned, Dr. Kotter was an excellent choice for gaining community support for the new online program. The familiarity with families in the community was essential as members of the community choose to support the campus because of the long standing relationships developed with Dr. Kotter over the years. Yet, along with the positives associated with having a seasoned and highly respected principal at a newly developed campus, there were also some negative aspects as well.

Positively speaking, Dr. Kotter’s 23 years of experience and community involvement created an immediate culture of trust between the community and the campus. Parents in the community consistently came in with questions about the online program and wanted their children to attend school with Dr. Kotter. The community support and acceptance was immediate and extraordinary! Enrollment was steadily increasing for the ROC with Dr. Kotter as principal. By November, the ROC reached its 100 student capacity and the campus began a waiting list. There were an abundance of positives associated with Dr. Kotter as the principal of the ROC, yet there were also some negative aspects as well.

At the Rydell Online Campus, technology is embedded in the culture of the school. Technology drives the instruction as well as communication with the online teachers, onsite teachers, support staff, parents, and students. At the ROC, curriculum, textbooks, and lesson plans are developed and provided by the online vendor.[[5]](#footnote-5) And, all access to student records, progress, and schedules are found in the online databases. There is a large amount of technology usage in the daily operations at the Rydell Online Campus. Consequently, the technology usage was foreign to Dr. Kotter which caused a lot of unclear and ineffective communication.

The lack of understanding of online learning caused much confusion for Dr. Kotter. Unfortunately, he did not have a clear idea of how online learning programs functioned and how demanding online learning would be for non-motivated students. A 21st century online learner is required to self-manage time and complete an abundance of independent reading. Therefore, there was a criteria developed by central office for enrollment into the ROC (**Table A**). Yet, often Dr. Kotter’s waned to provide every student with the opportunity to be a part of the new online learning campus which created more problems than anticipated.

Dr. Kotter was known in the community to have a “heart of gold” because he always wants to help those in need. Therefore, as the principal, he did not want to turn any students away from the opportunities at the ROC which resulted in him accepting every student who exhibited interest in the program without consideration of the admissions requirements. As a result, since the admissions protocol was not followed, several of the students were facing extreme challenges with the online curriculum due to their lack of understanding as it related to the content and/or lack of motivation to complete the online coursework.

**Conclusion of the First Year**

By the completion of the school year, 40 of the 49 seniors graduated which was commendable, yet the other 60 students did not have an equally successful year. The effort from the staff to assist the seniors with coursework was tremendous. Dr. Kotter would go pick seniors up from their homes and make them come to school. Also, he would conduct home visits, provide money for students and families in need, increase hours of operation beyond school hours, treat students to meals when they did not like the school food, allow students to work from home opposed to reporting for the required 20 hours a week, and more. Nonetheless, while Dr. Kotter focused on supporting the seniors, he neglected to provide the same amount of support for the underclassmen and increased stress among the staff.

While the efforts to support seniors took place, the ROC in its entirety was under the microscope of central office and the school board. District officials constantly wanted to know how the program was functioning, so Dr. Kotter would always report that all was functioning well. He would highlight the A’s and B’s earned, but would withhold information regarding the failed grades. He would only send reports documenting the success of seniors since they were the focus group behind the implementation of the online campus. The underclassman complained of favoritism towards the seniors, and the staff became stressed as they were continuously told to “do what you have to do.” Staff felt that their instructions to replace online course work with projects worth triple the points, and exempt assignments that were too time consuming for those that procrastinated all year was unfair and unethical. Staff had to cram a years worth of school work into 2-3 months all to ensure seniors graduated. Things had become chaotic by May due to the lack of accountability among students and absence of respect between staff members.

Staff reported that they felt that their jobs were not taken seriously and there was no appreciation for their efforts to support students. They also felt that they were told to act unethically and when they would voice their concerns they began to feel bullied. Underclassmen were not reporting to school and were not completing their work. And as seniors continued to pass courses the others continued to fail. **Table B** provides the end of year statistics for the ROC. School officials were appalled by the lack of accurate reporting. With the data presented school officials were forced to decide if they would allow the principal to remain or if they will bring in another administrator who is honest and understands the demands of an online learning environment.

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| **Table A**  Rydell Online Campus Admissions Requirements  Official admission to the Rydell Online Campus is contingent upon the following criteria:   1. Students must be reading proficiently at a 9th grade level or higher - Minimum 900 Score on BPS Reading Assessment 2. In the case of an admissions waiting list, seniors will be given preferential admission selection. 3. Admissions of students with specific special education services and accommodations must be weighed carefully prior to making a referral. A meeting, including the special education committee and a representative from the satellite campus must precede admission to the program. 4. Students between 15 – 22 years of age are eligible for admission. 5. Students must express an interest and investment in attending the campus. Referrals solely based on punitive measures will not be considered. 6. Students under 18 years of age must receive parental consent prior to admission. 7. ELL Students must have an English Language Proficiency score of a 4 or higher. |

**Table B**

Senior Grades Earned:

A- 51

B-44

C-76

D- 74

F- 36

Number of Seniors:49

Total Number of Courses Complete: 245

Number of Course Incomplete: 36

Average Number of Weekly Hours Onsite: 22

Junior Grades Earned:

A- 22

B- 27

C- 17

D-38

F- 78

Number of Juniors : 26

Total Number of Courses Complete: 104

Number of Course Incomplete: 78

Average Number of Weekly Hours Onsite: 18

Sophomore Grades Earned:

A-9

B-13

C-12

D- 20

F- 72

Number of Sophomores: 18

Total Number of Courses Complete: 54

Number of Course Incomplete: 72

Average Number of Weekly Hours Onsite: 16

Freshman Grades Earned:

A-0

B-1

C- 5

D-10

F- 35

Number of Freshmen: 7

Total Number of Courses Complete: 16

Number of Course Incomplete: 35

Average Number of Weekly Hours Onsite: 1

**Teaching Notes**

This case study highlights how school leaders tackle tremendous challenges when developing and implementing new initiatives in a schools and/or districts that have long histories of underachieving minority populations. Also, this case highlights the ongoing uncertainty school leaders confront given their organizational position between the school district and their personal beliefs. To resolve the dilemmas presented, the principal must balance a number of issues related to developing a new program such as: establishing a strong school culture, having adequate resources and staffing, and monitoring and reporting school data. In the short term, the school leader attempts to establish a school culture that promotes student learning to ensure the students graduate while balancing personal beliefs about the public education system. This case was developed to explore systematic improvements in a school district with declining graduation rates. This case study also exposes that the district struggles to meet the needs of the 21st century learner. As students are gaining more access to technology, they are afforded a wide variety of options in their everyday life. However, many public schools still use a one size fits all “factory” learning model which produces challenges in student achievement. There are three activities that that are outlined within major themes throughout the case study. The topics discussed can be used for aspiring educational leaders to create rich conversations about the importance of the using the matters discussed as they relate to the public education system.

**Activity 1: Ethical and Moral Standings**

Without a doubt, Dr. Kotter is facing various problems of significance. The decisions made in this case may have a substantial effect on the Rydell Online Campus (ROC). One critical decision that Dr. Kotter will have to (consciously or unconsciously) make is in deciding how he will frame the concerns that he encountered in his first year at the ROC.

As it relates to ethical concerns at the ROC, Boleman and Deal (2013) remind us that ethics and soul are essential for living a good life as well as managing a fulfilling organization. Ethics ultimately must be rooted in the soul: an organization’s commitment to deeply rooted identity, beliefs, and values. The most important responsibility of leaders is not to answer every question or get every decision right. Leaders serve a deeper and more enduring role if they are models a catalyst for values like excellence, caring, justice, and faith.

In relation to ethical concerns at the ROC, the Deontological and Teleological theory presents a very different perspectives on the elements of ethical and moral standing. Ciulla, Price, and Murphy (2005) explain that from a deontological perspective, as long as a leader acts according to his/her duties or moral principles, the leader is acting ethically. From this perspective, the outcomes of leadership are irrelevant in the ethical equation and only intent matters. Conversely, the teleological theories locate the ethics of an action in its results. A decision is only ethical if it brings about something “morally good.” Based on these competing theories, one must effectively analyze both elements when considering the morality of the response to this dilemma. One must explore the intent of the individual to determine whether their actions had a moral or ethical foundation and then one must examine the results of these actions to determine whether they led to positive results.

**Discussions, questions, and activities.**

The following is recommended discussions and writing prompts that can be implemented in discussions with educational leaders:

* When analyzing the cases study, what are some ethical concerns that have developed? How does politics play a role in decision making? What is the end result of unethical behavior? Does this case resonate with your personal experiences?
* What is the overall responsibility of Principal Kotter? What would Boleman and Deal say to Dr. Kotter about his responsibility as the principal with ethical behavior? Would Boleman and Deal agree/disagree with Dr. Kotter? Why?
* Does Principal Kotter appear to be more influenced by deontological or teleological perceptions of ethics?
* How does his loyalty to his district and loyalty himself affect him as an educational leader?
* Who are the key players in the case? What factors do they play in developing a reason for Principal Kotter to demonstrate unethical behavior? Putting yourself in Dr. Kotter’s position, what would you have done differently?

Suggested Reading

Ciulla, J. B., Price, T. L., & Murphy, S. E. (2005). The quest for moral leaders: Essays on leadership ethics Cheltenham, UK: Edward Elgar.

Grint, K. (2005). Problems, problems, problems: The social construction of “leadership.” Human Relations, 58, 1967-1994.

Rittell, H., & Webber, M. (1973). Dilemmas in a general theory of planning. Policy Sciences , 4, 155-169

Bolman, L., & Deal, T. (2013). Reframing the path to school leadership: A guide for teachers and principals. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press

**Activity 2: Teacher quality**

The purpose of this activity is to examine teacher quality. To have a successful school an administrator must be able to identify and promote teacher quality, in which, would develop into teacher leadership. Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) state that school leader must first establish a successful staff culture before focusing on building teacher leaders. This case study discusses some key issues pertaining to teacher quality and the lack of development of teacher quality within the school. Too, it also considers the perception of teacher demeanor within a community, and the public ideal of what a teacher should represent and embody. This case study involves the correlation between teacher quality and student learning.

**Recommended discussion and/or writing prompts:**

If you were Principal Kotter and given the responsibility of opening a new school tasked with increasing the graduation rate and meeting the needs of the 21st century learner. As the principal you are responsible for hiring a staff that will implement you vision of the new school. Consider the following questions:

* What is the structure of the school? How does it maximize learning? What would Bambrick-Santoyo tell Dr. Kotter he needed to implement in his first year to support student success?
* How do you define the role of a teacher? What key attributes must they have? What key factors must be in place to reduce teacher retention in the first year?
* Bambrick-Santoyo state that you must first establish a school culture to help foster teacher leadership. What are the five strategies that can be implemented to foster a successful staff culture?
* What type of professional development was needed to support teachers in the ROC? How will ensure that it is relevant to the teachers and increasing student achievement? What measure must be put into place to monitor its effectiveness?

**Linking the Case to Theory**

One aspect explored in this case is the effect teacher quality has upon student learning. In addition to a substantial body of research which suggests the direct link between the quality of classroom teachers and student achievement (Prince, 2002), public recognition exists regarding the correlation between school improvement and teacher quality (Phelps Deily, 2002). In using this case study, instructors may want to explore the connection between teacher quality and student learning.

**Activity 3: Establishing school culture**

The purpose of this activity is to demonstrate what Principal Kotter experienced when he was implementing a school culture at the ROC. Bambrick-Santoyo (2012) would tell us that one way to develop a positive school culture is to implement the seven levers. The instructional levers are data driven instruction, observation and feedback, instructional planning, and professional development. The cultural levers are student culture, staff culture and managing school leadership teams.

When building a school cultural, it is vital to provide clear and constant communication. This communication should involve stakeholders and provide direction for leading, managing, and guiding the school particularly during periods of change and complexity. The school in the case scenario was experiencing several changes particularly in the areas of discipline, student motivation, parental involvement, and academic achievement. To address changes, schools should encourage passion for the school and emotionally support teachers to navigate change (Fullan, 1999). The characteristics of organizations who are able to successfully navigate change, referred to as collaborative cultures for complex times, include: (a) fostering diversity while building trust, (b) provoking and containing anxiety, (c) creating knowledge, (d) combining connectedness with open-endedness, and (e) fusing the spiritual, political, and intellectual (Fullan, 1999). Facilitating these components can help leaders build a culture of collaboration, participation, and action. Although there was still an overall culture of facilitating excellence, the school stakeholders needed to begin addressing the long-term impacts of the changes and what they would do to sustain the culture of excellence.

Recommended discussion and/or writing prompts included:

* What factors would Bambrick-Santoyo state Dr. Kotter implemented to build a negative school culture? Which of these factors could Principal Kotter prevent? To what degree can the changes be corrected to produce a positive school culture? How?
* If you were Principal Kotter, how would build a positive school cultural? What measurements would you put in place to support the change cycle that you would encounter as the year progress?
* If you were the principal, what measures would you put in place to communicate with your staff to promote a positive school culture to address student motivation, discipline, and a lack of parental support? How could Dr. Kotter use his staff to systematically address the aforementioned concerns?

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Phelps-Deily, M. (2002). Teaching quality viewed as crucial. Education Week.

Prince, C. D. (2002). The challenge of attracting good teachers and principals to struggling schools. Alexandria, Virginia: American Association of School Administrators.

1. BPS is 36% African American, 34% Hispanic, 21% White, 6% Asian/Pacific Islander and American Indian and 3% unspecified. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Online credit recovery courses are used to recover credits for courses previously failed. Credit recovery courses use pre- and post-unit diagnostic tools to determine if the student is ready to move on to the next unit. Students can move quickly through material they have already mastered, and spend more time on material they struggle with or that requires intervention from a teacher. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Acceleration courses are for students who prefer to be challenged. Acceleration courses include college-level Honors courses and AP courses. These courses are designed to prepare students for success on AP exams, providing students the opportunity to earn credit at most of the nation's colleges and universities. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Support Staff at the Rydell Online Campus include: 1 Nurse, 1 Psychologist, 2 Counselors, and 2 Social Workers [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Online vendors provide the specific services necessary for institutions to launch online education programs such as 24/7 technical support, online course design, access to online teachers, and online curriculum. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)