



POWERLESS TO POWERFUL

Leadership for School Change, A Book Review

—REBECCA BARRETT-FOX

Nearly half of new teachers leave the profession within their first five years—including almost ten percent who leave after their first year, according to the 2014 Consortium for Police Research in Education report “Seven Trends: The Transformation of the Teaching Force.” Among the factors that push people who were, at one point, committed enough to education to earn a degree in it to change their career goals, “change fatigue” is high on the list. Constant criticism, pressure to turn around schools labeled as failing, and the perpetual implementation of new programs—with new roles for teachers, new demands on their time, new methods for data collection and analysis to determine if those activities are working, all of which could be abandoned with the appointment of a new administrator—these all overwhelm teachers and contribute to feelings of hopelessness. Such “activity-driven” approaches ultimately fail because they ask teachers to do more without putting teachers’ priorities and needs first.

A servant-leadership approach, in contrast, moves teachers and thus entire school communities from being and feeling “powerless to powerful,” as Charles Salina, Suzann Girtz, and



Joanie Epping have titled their new book on leading a school through change. Salina, now the chair of the Leadership and Administration Department in Gonzaga University's School of Education, served as the transformational principal in an underperforming public high school in Washington State. Like other struggling schools, Sunnyside was in a disadvantaged position: 95% of students were eligible for free or reduced lunch, one measure of poverty among students' families. Many parents were migrant laborers, working multiple jobs, and a sizable number of students were English language learners. The graduation hovered around 50%. Within the school, teachers were frustrated and felt unsupported and even undermined. For years, the school had been listed as in the bottom 5% in the state, increasing pressure on teachers to improve student performance but also contributing to their feelings of powerlessness.

While the story of Sunnyside and its dramatic improvement provides the key example in *Powerless to Powerful: Leadership for School Change*, the book provides few specific examples of activities or programs to transform schools. This is quite deliberate. Instead, the book promotes an orientation toward leadership that must come first, before any activity, and must come from without—that is, from official school leaders—and will then, through modeling, be taken up by teachers. For teachers who are worn out on school reform and rightfully leery of being asked to do something different (again), *Powerless to Powerful* is a great relief. The principles of servant leadership that administrators are urged to adopt rest



on the assumption that all people involved in education—students, teachers, parents, other administrators—want to do their best and that they can do so if they are supported. The job of administrators is to identify the strengths of teachers, provide opportunities for them to exercise their strengths in ways that contribute to school goals, listen to and then meet their needs, and build their capacities. Teachers who are appreciated, supported, and connected are better satisfied with their jobs and do them better. The result is a more functional school community, (Freire & Fernades, 2016) in the US and abroad (Cerit, 2000; Crippen, 2004).

In the first part of *Powerless to Powerful*, Salina, Girtz, and Eppinga outline the principles and conceptual framework of servant leadership in a struggling school. In an era that prioritizes quantitative data as evidence, the authors remind readers that, while education is a social science, it is rooted in humanistic concerns. (But every teacher knows this—children do not “play school” by reviewing standardized test scores; they do it by lining up their stuffed animals or unwilling younger siblings and talking with them and doing pretend activities that connect ideas to people.) “If we are to contribute to the greater good,” write the authors, reminding readers of the purpose of education, “we must ourselves be nurtured and nurturing in all realms of existence” (p. 2). Drawing from the work of servant-leadership pioneer Robert Greenleaf, they note that the goal is to work with people to meet their higher order needs so that their capacities can grow. Actions must be embedded in an intentional approach, allowing teachers to see



and invest in the goals. In this framework, the authors identify academic press, social support, and relationship trust as the framework for any lasting school change.

The second part of the book, “Leadership Lessons Learned,” reflects on the importance of one-on-one conversations with teachers, intentional actions, time use, teacher buy-in, evidence use and misuse, positive language, district-wide relationships, and supporting all school personal, including custodians, administrative assistance, and food service workers. While it provides more specific examples of how servant-leadership can be implemented, the book never turns in to a “to-do” list of activities. Instead, it remains centered on the principles of servant-leadership: listening to and learning from those served, including students and their families; identifying their strengths and needs, building their capacities and supporting them as they become servant-leaders for students, teaching colleagues, and school staff—the key measure of the effectiveness of servant-leadership; standing aside as this process heals broken systems; and building community so that the cycle of servant-leadership continues. Educators will be heartened to find that this does not put more work or blame on them, as the authors stress repeatedly that teacher “failures” are really a failure of administrators to care for the needs and support capacity-building among faculty. Scholars interested in servant leadership broadly, not just in an educational concept, will find a through, robust, and accessible application of Greenleaf’s principles in a domain—education—where they could hardly matter more. Indeed, what is perhaps most *discouraging* about



the book is that it is one of the few whole-school applications of servant leadership; that educational administrators must be taught the value of servant leadership and have it modeled to them, more than four decades after Greenleaf began outlining the tenets of servant leadership, is a worrying statement about schools of education and the ways that they prepare future school administrators.

Though *Powerless to Powerful* uses Principal Salina's experience at Sunnyside as the key case study, the book is not his story but instead draws from ample scholarly literature to support its major points. In general, this works well to show that Sunnyside is not an exceptional case and Salina not an exceptional leader; instead, what he did with Sunnyside, rooted in a thoughtful literature of school success, can be done at any school by any leader who embraces servant-leadership and has to the skills to implement it. However, the book includes few specific, extended examples from Sunnyside—the kind of illustration that might be a jumping off point for discussion, including opportunities for readers to think “What would I have done in that situation?” For example, one of Salina's leadership strategies is to connect regularly one-on-one with the adults in the school, a time with “no agenda” in which he will “just listen to how each staff person defines the current reality and what the ideal looks like from his or her perspective” (p. 29). This is a potentially powerful tool, one that he encourages his teachers to use with struggling students, too (p. 13). Yet readers are not presented with any specific instances of one of these conversations or how their “profound impact”



(p. 30) changed Sunnyside. Some lack of detail might be expected given that *Powerless to Powerful* is about real, identifiable people (people who had been labeled “failing” for years), but those details would have also helped cement the value of the strategies suggested in the book.

Over time, the servant leadership model does not necessarily create more work for educational administrators, either, as the new model moves leaders from spending time primarily addressing imminent disasters or avoiding confrontation but also avoiding leadership duties. In supporting new behaviors to create new attitudes, administrators will likely face immediate backlash from teachers worn out on calls for change. However, as teachers see themselves respected and listened to and their ideas implemented, backlash subsides and is replaced by pride. Backbiting and undermining disappear, and the problems that come with low morale—high turnover and absenteeism, chronic complaining, confrontation and useless conflict—also disappear. For teachers and administrators who feel stuck in a situation they cannot control, this message is encouraging and empowering.

At points, readers may wonder, “But what can I do *today*?” The second book in this series, *Transforming Schools through Systems Change*, by the same authors and also published by Rowman and Littlefield (2016), provides practical strategies and specific tools for bringing servant-leadership to struggling public schools. Given that *Powerless to Powerful* is relatively short—under 90 pages—it would have been easy enough to combine them into a single volume, which is likely what some



readers would have preferred. However, keeping this volume short means it can be read and discussed relatively quickly—in just two or three lunchtime book group meetings; additionally, separating the nuts and bolts of changing school culture into a separate volume prevents those eager to rush to implementation from getting too far ahead of the slower, often more painful but foundational work of changing orientations.

Given the potential of servant leadership to transform public education and the teaching profession, Salina, Girtz, and Eppinga's book is a welcome addition to the literature on servant leadership in general (Liden, Panaccio, Mesuer, Hu, & Wayne, 2014) and a hopeful start to continued work on servant leadership in education. Ideally, others will take up their work, pushing toward radical servant leadership, which “calls for leaders to make the justice,” not just the welfare, “of their followers their number one priority and to further inculcate this sense of justice in followers so that they may one day become radical servant leaders themselves and fight for it” (Letizia, 2014, p. 193)—a re-orientating that could help change not just students' views on their education but on their broader value to the global citizenry.

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