



**Pushing the Boundaries:
Redistricting the Kentwood Schools
Teaching Note**

Introduction

This case was written as one of a series of four cases looking at issues of leadership from the perspective of a school superintendent. The case has not yet been used in a teaching situation. Thus this note is exploratory and prospective. It is hoped that teachers and facilitators who use the case will add their comments and reflections so that this note will begin to reflect actual classroom experience.

Synopsis

Mary Leiker, superintendent of schools in the Grand Rapids suburb of Kentwood, had a dream. Kentwood is a diverse community, with trailer parks, subsidized housing, as well as large single-family homes. Appointed in 1991, Leiker had concentrated in her first five years on a series of fiscal and academic goals. But her vision for Kentwood was that the student population of each elementary school would reflect, in racial and socioeconomic terms, the community as a whole. She saw the building of a new school, which would require redrawing elementary school boundaries, as an opportunity to bring that vision into reality. Leiker wanted to distribute children from lower economic families, so-called “at risk” children, more or less equally around the town’s elementary schools. She began the redistricting process in February 1996. She had the advantages of a good reputation as an able administrator and a recent hard-fought success in passing a referendum, on the third try, allowing the district to raise \$20 million

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over the next ten years for improvement in the schools' physical plants. But she knew there would be serious obstacles.

The redistricting would have to be completed in two months in order to be ready for the fall. Second, the redistricting would come after three others in the past seven years. Third, funding and site complications had forced building at a location that required much more student relocation to significantly affect economic diversity. Finally, parents increasingly had other options if they did not like the redistricting plan: move to another suburb or, more likely, choose to send their children to charter, parochial or private schools.

Leiker established general goals for the size of the student population in various schools and included considering the "at-risk" population as part of the guidelines for drawing boundaries. The new school's principal-designate drew up four plans that met her criteria and then, in late February, she had the board create a steering committee to consider the options. The committee was half parents and half schoolteachers and administrators. The committee selected two boundary options to be presented at a series of four public meetings beginning on March 18. Letters were sent to all parents who might be affected.

The meetings were stormy. The issue of spreading out "at risk" students was not explicit, but the opposition of parents to their children having to change schools was across all segments of those who might be involved. When the board made spreading out "at risk" children an explicit goal, those parents were offended and the opposition of other parents intensified. The steering committee met twice after the public meetings but could not reach a recommendation. Leiker then created a special board subcommittee to propose a final recommendation within a couple of weeks.

Several opposition groups were organized, the newest and most determined being from Princeton Estates, one of the town's highest income neighborhoods. Leiker and her three member board subcommittee attended one of the Princeton Estates meetings, which was characterized by television cameras, hostile questions, and a focus on the implications of spreading "at risk" children throughout the system. On April 8, the board subcommittee and the Princeton Estates group each presented plans at another stormy public meeting.

On April 11, the subcommittee presented a plan to the full board at a standing room only meeting that included many of the elements of the Princeton Estates plan. The Board unanimously approved the plan, to moans of anger and disbelief from the parents in the audience. Leiker considered the redistricting initiative a success, implementation was smooth, although the plan didn't come close to achieving socioeconomic district-wide equity. The percentage of "at-risk" students and minority students actually increased at the two schools that already had the highest percentages of "at-risk" students.

Teaching Objectives

This case was written to stimulate a discussion of superintendent leadership. In that respect, it focuses on questions of appropriate process, what you do with your own personal vision, decisions about radical versus incremental change, and whether/when/how to make provocative goals explicit. It also raises issues of parental involvement, the appropriate criteria for drawing school boundary lines, and board/superintendent relations.

Teaching Plan

The following might be useful questions for students/participants to consider in advance of class discussion:

- (A) How do you assess Leiker's leadership?
- (B) What are the appropriate criteria in drawing school boundaries?
- (C) What other processes might have been used here?

I might begin the discussion with the question: "Was Leiker's objective of spreading "at risk" students throughout the schools appropriate?"

Follow-up questions would be:

- (A) By what authority and on what basis does a superintendent develop a vision?
- (B) Should she have persevered in light of the widespread opposition?
- (C) Should she have been more or less explicit in articulating her goal?
- (D) Did she settle for too little, given how much capital she had expended in the struggle?
- (E) Were there other, perhaps better, processes for doing the redistricting?
- (F) How do you measure her success?

Appendices

The case is 15 pp. plus three one-page appendices:

- A map of Kenwood schools.
- The January 1996 enrollment breakdown by school.
- The proposed breakdown under the plan which was finally adopted.