Preface

The Demographic Divide

The composition of the workplace—whether people are young or old, black or white, conservative or liberal, urbanite or country folk—shapes every aspect of an organization's being. Complicating matters is the fact that the workforce is changing drastically as Americans live longer, more immigrants find jobs, and older employees postpone retirement. For a school, the plurality of those who serve students controls its destiny. School systems cannot contemplate their future without understanding the demographic DNA of the staff, parents, and students entwined within it.

SIZING UP THE POPULATION

To get a glimpse of what lies ahead for public education, let's size up our population using the structure of a pyramid. In most countries, the babies and young people at the base surpass the shrinking pool of elders at the top. Currently, however, the population pyramid in the United States has a bulging midsection of Baby Boomers who are aging slowly while steadfastly retaining their powerful place in the workforce.

According to demographers, the pudgy pyramid is going to trim down in the next decade and take on the shape of an hourglass (Zolli, 2006). With semiretired Boomers on top and Millennials (who are predicted to surpass the Baby Boom generation in size) at the bottom, Generation X will find itself squeezed into the middle. As imagined, the hourglass society working and weighing in on the educational issues will have a dramatic impact on what happens in schools.

Most educators aren't fully prepared for this transformation, nor do they understand the generational lines in the sand that may be drawn during such rapidly changing times. Adding to the dilemma is the reality that the generational blueprint of a school staff is seldom touched on in the training of future administrators nor is it being addressed in leadership development for current superintendents or principals. With the professional learning community movement pushing for more collaboration in the schoolhouse, it will be hard to mind the gap without looking at the cross-age differences involved.

WHO'S SIMMERING IN YOUR STEW?

This book is designed to introduce school leaders to the traits, hot buttons, and tipping points of four distinct generations working in American schools today: Veterans (born 1922–1943), Baby Boomers (born 1944–1960), Generation X (born 1960–1980), and Millennials (born 1980–2000). Included in each chapter are specific ideas and tools to help readers not only understand and manage the mix but also successfully foster coalescence among intergenerational teams.

While it is important to be familiar with the many ingredients simmering in your employee stew, it is not enough to stop there. It is also necessary to respond to the generational appetite of the customers who sample the daily cuisine. To that end, we have devoted an entire chapter to describing the Millennial students sitting in our classroom seats. And an additional chapter is included to assist readers in dealing with Millennials' parents who constantly hover and dote upon them. Clearly, the demographic milieu is no longer a singular sensation with similar occupational ideals, educational values, and outlook on life.

FIXING FLAWS, FLAWED FIXES

Throughout our nation's history, each generation has been educated to fix the flaws that surfaced during the previous generation's youth (Howe & Strauss, 2000). In fact, the one thing we can count on with an age-driven society is that it will be the distinct opposite of the one that came before it. The premise behind zero tolerance affirms this phenomenon quite well.

Since the 1990s, crusaders from all sides of the political spectrum have convinced the public that unless bad kids are removed from school, teachers can't teach and students can't learn. As a result, Millennials are the recipients of the most severe discipline ever imposed upon children.

The irony is that such harsh measures have been adopted to cope with the mess rebellious Boomer and Generation X parents actually created. Needless to say, Millennials are the most compliant, achievement-oriented schoolhouse occupants in years.

The push to bring technology to every campus in the nation is another illustration of this hopscotch pattern. In the 1980s, principals scurried to get schools up to speed by purchasing Commodore computers for each classroom and setting up Apple IIe labs. Despite having access to these newfangled machines, most Veteran and Baby Boomer faculty stuck with their trusty 8 mm films and overhead projectors. With no relevant training on how to use the technology, predominant thinking was that students merely had to learn about computers, not necessarily learn from them or with them.

Meanwhile, the first batch of Millennials began arriving in classrooms in the late 1980s. They had learned how to manipulate a mouse before holding their own bottle. From Game Boys, to fiber-optic friendships, to twitch speed, students went global while teachers were still figuring out how to program the VCR. Computers are as familiar to a Millennial as a television is to a Baby Boomer.

PRIORITIES HAVE CHANGED

Under a prevailing belief that young people are getting older younger, school-age children expect to have a say in everything, including how they are educated. A teen in one recent study chortled, "People have to realize that *we* will set the standards and *we* will raise the bar" (Geraci, 2005).

For teachers, presenting the same material in the same fashion in which they may have learned it can lead to a cycle of boredom, especially as schools face such stiff competition for students' attention. Home school, charter school, and virtual school movements are gaining momentum as parents strive to ensure their talented kids are taught what they need to know in the manner Mom and Dad see fit.

Stepping outside our generational comfort zone is vital if we as teachers, principals, superintendents, central office leaders, and policymakers hope to reach this more tenacious clientele. Monumental issues such as poverty, global warming, and foreign competition require adolescents to leave high school with a bank of knowledge no other generation has needed before. This book will help readers build understanding around the multiage impressions that engulf their own workplace. As new ways to leverage every asset are discovered, the universal goal of improving learning for all students is accomplished.
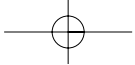
Is it possible to turn our schools into Romper Room, where people work and play splendidly together? Absolutely! Promoting an age-friendly workplace is easy if leaders set egos aside and avoid being judgmental. Paying attention to the generational trademarks of stakeholders is a sensible way to bridge the divide and spawn the collective responsibility necessary to get the results educators want, taxpayers expect, and students deserve.