LEADERSHIP LENS

Dr. Douglas Hendrix Sr.
Superintendent/CEO of Schools

A Child Died - And the Rest of Us Must Learn to Live Differently

November 10, 2026

A child died this week. I have returned to those four words repeatedly, hoping that somehow they might become easier to understand. They have not. Somewhere in our community, a family is confronting an absence that no passage of time can completely erase. The world has continued its ordinary movements. Traffic has filled the roads, people have returned to work, and families have gathered around dinner tables. But for one family, time has been divided forever into the life that existed before a devastating loss and the life that must somehow continue afterward. A child died, and I am still struggling to reconcile the enormity of that loss with the smallness of so many things that occupy our attention.

Earlier this week, we learned that one of our students had passed away following a medical emergency. Dr. Keith Colbert and I went to offer support because there are moments when the responsibilities of leadership extend far beyond administration. We went because a family was suffering, school personnel were grieving, and common human decency required our presence. I knew the experience would be difficult. What I did not know was how deeply it would reach into places within me that no professional title, experience, or preparation could protect.

What I encountered was a kind of grief that language cannot adequately describe. I witnessed a parent's anguish so profound that the cries seemed to rise from somewhere beneath the reach of ordinary human expression. There are sounds that remain with us long after the moment has passed, sounds that reveal how deeply one human being can love another and how unbearable it can be when that love suddenly has nowhere familiar to go. I watched a family confront a reality that no parent should ever have to endure, and I felt the terrible inadequacy of every comforting word I had ever learned. In that moment, the distance between the person I am as a Superintendent and the person I am as a parent disappeared. I understood that no amount of professional preparation could make me ready for what I was witnessing.

I have been privileged to lead people, solve complicated problems, make difficult decisions, and navigate circumstances that require composure. But I am not hardened against human suffering, and I never want to become so. I struggled to hold back my own tears. There was nothing I could say that would make what had happened acceptable. I offered our condolences, assured the family of the school district's support, and did what I could to provide comfort through presence and compassion. We remained for as long as circumstances allowed before returning to our responsibilities. But I did not truly leave that experience behind. A part of me remains in that moment, standing in the presence of a grief I could neither explain nor diminish.

They say empathy is among the highest expressions of emotional intelligence because it requires us to understand another person's experience while managing our own emotions. This experience reminded me that empathy is also one of the most demanding expressions of our humanity. It asks us to remain present when we would rather look away. It asks us to recognize another person's suffering without making ourselves the center of it. It requires us to care even when there is nothing to gain, nothing to solve immediately, and no applause waiting at the end. Sometimes the greatest measure of our humanity is whether another person has to suffer alone.

As I returned to the responsibilities of the week, I could not escape the contrast between what I had witnessed and so many of the conversations that had occupied the days before it. I thought about disagreements over control, disputes over preferences, competition for recognition, and the ways people sometimes disguise personal ambition in the language of service. I thought about adults demanding accommodation while another adult was being asked by life itself to endure something almost beyond human comprehension. There are moments when the circumstances of life expose how badly we have confused importance with attention. We become consumed with who has influence, who receives credit, whose feelings were offended, and whose position deserves protection, while the people who most need our collective strength are carrying burdens we can scarcely imagine.

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I am increasingly convinced that one of the greatest threats to our progress is our willingness to make ourselves the subject of work that was never supposed to be about us. We speak of children while arguing over adult preferences. We invoke community while protecting personal territory. We celebrate unity until cooperation requires us to share influence with someone we do not particularly like. We claim to want change while resisting every adjustment that might inconvenience us. We cannot continue asking children to grow into responsible adults while allowing adults to behave as though every disagreement is a contest for personal victory. At some point, we must become mature enough to surrender the smaller version of ourselves so that something greater can live through our service.

The loss of a child reminds us how urgently that transformation is needed. I do not know whether anything could have changed the outcome of this particular tragedy, and it would be irresponsible to suggest otherwise. But I know that every child's life matters, that every family deserves the opportunity to see its children grow, and that such a loss should awaken something in all of us. Grief does not give us permission to speculate about blame. It gives us a solemn reason to examine how faithfully we are caring for the living.

I cannot help thinking about the ordinary experiences that will never unfold for a life lost so early. The birthdays, friendships, school performances, family celebrations, graduations, and dreams that might have filled the years ahead. We speak often about preparing children for the future, but this week I was reminded that the future is never guaranteed to any of us. That is why the work of education and community development must be approached with such seriousness. We are entrusted with lives, with possibilities, and with precious time that none of us has the authority to replace.

Our mission in Clayton County is to help this community become better educated, better housed, more economically secure, and more abundant in opportunity. We want children to learn to read, families to experience stability, young people to discover their gifts, and adults to earn wages that support lives of dignity. We want neighborhoods where children are safe, schools where their potential is cultivated, and pathways that carry them toward meaningful futures. These aspirations require more than good intentions and impressive speeches. They require people who are willing to work together across differences, share responsibility, and place the well-being of others above the desire to be celebrated.

There is a difference between looking in the mirror and looking out the window. The mirror tells us how we appear. The window reminds us that an entire world exists beyond our reflection. Too many of our disagreements begin when we become so fascinated with what the mirror reveals that we forget to look through the window. We become preoccupied with our importance while someone outside is struggling to survive. We spend our energy polishing our image while the conditions surrounding our neighbors remain unchanged. This experience became a look-out-the-window moment for me. I witnessed suffering that made every argument about personal recognition seem painfully insignificant. I saw the human cost of a life interrupted, and I was reminded that our community needs far fewer people seeking to be seen and far more people willing to see.

We need a different kind of heroism. We need people who will help without demanding credit, serve without expecting repayment, and cooperate without insisting upon control. We need leaders who understand that their greatest contribution may never carry their names. We need neighbors who notice when a family is struggling, employers who create opportunities, educators who refuse to give up on children, and people of faith and goodwill who turn compassion into meaningful action. The world has enough people auditioning for the role of hero. What it needs are ordinary people willing to do extraordinary good without a costume, an audience, or the promise of exaltation.

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And we need to begin now. There is no season in which our children can afford to wait for adults to finish competing over territory. There is no time to preserve every preference, nurse every grievance, or insist that cooperation must first satisfy our personal relationships. We cannot allow tomorrow's success to be held hostage by yesterday's disagreements. The children we serve are growing older while we debate. Their needs are becoming more urgent while we negotiate our comfort. Their opportunities are being shaped by what we are willing to do today. Change will require courage, and courage will require us to become mature enough to accept that some familiar arrangements, attitudes, and behaviors cannot accompany us into the future we claim to want.

I have said many times that the children eat first. Following this loss, those words carry an even deeper meaning. They mean that a child's life must matter more than an adult's ego, that a family's suffering must command more attention than our personal disagreements, and that the future of this community must outweigh the desire of any individual to be important within it. They mean that we must build institutions capable of responding to human need with competence and compassion. They mean that we cannot measure our success merely by the programs we announce or the recognition we receive. We must measure it by whether lives are being strengthened, opportunities are expanding, and people are experiencing the dignity of being genuinely cared for.

Even now, as I reflect on what happened, I find myself overcome with emotion. I share that because I want people to understand that leadership has never required me to surrender my humanity. I can make difficult decisions, enforce expectations, and confront uncomfortable realities. But I cannot become indifferent to a family's anguish. I cannot treat that suffering as another event on a calendar or another responsibility to be completed. I do not want to become the kind of person who can walk away from such a moment unchanged. If our work ever becomes so routine that another person's heartbreak no longer reaches us, we should question whether we still understand the people we have been called to serve.

I also recognize that the family whose grief I witnessed deserves privacy, dignity, and the freedom to mourn without becoming the subject of public speculation. I share this experience because it changed something in me, and because I believe the lesson belongs to all of us. We must learn to carry one another's burdens with greater tenderness. We must stop confusing personal victory with community progress. We must recognize that a person can be deeply wounded by life while the rest of us remain occupied with matters that will mean very little when our own difficult hour arrives. Every family will eventually need the compassion of someone beyond its own walls. We should build that kind of community before the hour comes.

A child died this week. Somewhere, there is now a space that no one can fill, a familiar presence that will be profoundly missed, and a family learning to live with an absence that love cannot erase. The rest of us will continue attending meetings, making decisions, navigating disagreements, and managing the ordinary demands of our lives. I pray that we will do so differently. I pray that we will become slower to wound, quicker to help, more willing to listen, and courageous enough to put aside whatever prevents us from doing good together.

Let the remainder of this year become a testimony to what we value. Let us spend less time lifting ourselves and more time lifting people. Let us repair relationships where we can, release grievances that serve no constructive purpose, and confront the conditions that continue to diminish opportunity for our neighbors. Let us stop waiting for someone else to become the decent person a difficult moment requires. We are already here. The needs are already before us. And the time we have been given is already passing.

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I cannot undo this loss or return to the moment before it happened. But I can honor what I witnessed by allowing it to make me more compassionate, more purposeful, and more determined to help build a community in which people do not have to struggle alone. I can ask the same of every person entrusted with influence, authority, resources, or simply the ability to extend a helping hand.

A child died this week. May we have the decency to let that brief life remind us how precious every life is, the wisdom to recognize what truly matters, and the courage to come together while there is still time to make a difference for someone else.

The children eat first. And now, more than ever, I am asking the adults to grow up, come together, and help one another live.

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