

NEWSLETTER

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May | 2006

6 DON'TS of SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT and Their SOLUTIONS

HUGH BURKETT, director of The Center for Comprehensive School Reform and Improvement, recently was asked to give the keynote speech at On the Right Track 4, an annual school improvement symposium for California school practitioners. In this month's newsletter, Dr. Burkett shares highlights from his remarks.

When I accepted this invitation, I was told in no uncertain terms that my speech should not be about “what research says” or “the characteristics of high-performing schools.” This speech had to be practical. I had to talk about how to *do* what we know works to improve schools. After 30 years of experience as a teacher, a principal, an assistant superintendent, and a superintendent—working in large districts and small—I should have collected a lot of wisdom that I could share. But honestly, after 30 years, I often think that I know a lot more about what *not* to do than anything else. So this speech will be about six *don'ts* of school improvement—six things that should never be done if you're trying to improve schools and what I've learned from doing every one of them.

1. *Don't Depend Solely on the Principal to Lead the School*

As a superintendent and a former principal myself, I was convinced that a school was only as good as the principal running it. I expected that an outstanding principal would be able to turn around a struggling school single-handedly, preferably overnight. A good principal was a strong person with a considerable ego who would be organized and decisive. My mistake? I defined leadership very narrowly. I assumed that school leadership was a job for a single person.

This time around, I would rethink what leadership means, and I would make sure that every person in the school saw himself or herself as a leader. As a principal, I always respected and admired good teachers, but I always thought my job was to get roadblocks out of their way so they could “just teach.” But I’ve come to realize that teachers who are involved in leadership roles are actually better teachers. They are more engaged in their profession, more likely to innovate and experiment, and more likely to feel responsible for the school’s success and for the success of its kids. There are all kinds of leadership roles for teachers, from speaking up at a faculty meeting to helping decide how the budget gets spent. Good principals don’t protect teachers from leadership; they encourage them to lead.

2. *Don’t Rely on Selection Strategies to Build a Teaching Staff*

As an urban superintendent, I was always on the lookout for outstanding urban teachers who would love our kids and teach them well. We were strategic in our searching, using a research-based screening tool to identify hundreds of teachers with high affect, strong dedication, and a desire to work in an urban setting; we hired many of them. But we found after a short time that these new teachers felt negative, pessimistic, and ready to quit. What was my mistake? We paid a lot of attention to screening and hiring teachers but not nearly enough to inducting them, mentoring them, and nurturing them. A good initial match just wasn’t enough.

What should I have done? I should have paid more attention to follow through with new teachers. Where were they teaching? How were they assigned? Were their schools following tradition by assigning the least experienced teachers to the most academically needy students? How were they inducted when they got there? Did they learn everything there was to know in the teachers’ lounge or was there a purposeful program of induction in their school that explained “who we are, what we believe in, and how we do business here”?

I should have paid more attention to mentoring. Like most districts, we had a mentoring program, but it wasn’t very strong. We didn’t systematically identify outstanding mentors or pay attention to whether they believed in the core vision of the district. We didn’t give them time to mentor. New teachers often felt alone and overwhelmed. No wonder so many of them grew sour; we threw them in the deep end of the pool and yelled, “Good luck!”

Induction, mentoring, and ongoing nurturing through support, feedback, and meaningful learning opportunities. They all need attention.

3. *Don’t Assume That Writing an Aligned Curriculum Will Improve Teaching*

One of my first challenges as a new superintendent was to make sure the district had a curriculum that was aligned with the new state content standards. So I got people to work on the task. Our target was the creation of a written framework that identified what we taught at every grade level. I did it right—involved teachers, had the drafts looked at by experts, and built a review cycle. I was very proud of this project and talked about it all the time. My mistake? I focused on the document and not on the teaching. Writing curriculum doesn’t guarantee that teachers will know how to use it.

I know now that building a curriculum framework is only the first step. We thought that by defining *what* to teach, our job was done. It would be up to each school and each teacher to choose the *how*. For a master teacher, that might have been a gift. But for rookie, unproven, or struggling teachers (and every district has a lot of them), we needed pacing guides and other resources—tools that would help them understand what should happen when and how. We needed solid professional development to help staff make the transition from content to lesson. We should have cared more about creating formative assessments and helping teachers use those data to shape their instruction. And, most importantly, we should have been more forthright and honest in

appraising instruction. Our observation feedback often was politely vague. Our “critical friends” teacher groups were long on the “friends” part and short on the “critical” part. Nobody wanted to hurt anyone’s feelings or make judgments. Our kids suffered from our hesitation.

4. *Steven Covey’s “Start With the End in Mind” is Good Advice, But Don’t Forget the Middle*

One of the most energizing things I ever did as a school or district leader was to get people fired up about a vision for the future. I understood that the first step toward reform is getting folks to envision what “it” could look like. I also was big on making plans. I hired staff that could sit at the table with principals and teachers and help them craft SMART goals and savvy strategies for achieving them. We had the beginning, and we could picture the end. My mistake was missing the middle and the whole concept of benchmarking.

What would I do differently? I would understand that it’s not enough to dream the dream and write the plan and then wait until the end of the year to see if it worked, just as it’s not enough to teach the kids and wait until the big test to see what they learned. It’s important to check along the way.

Did our school plans work? Our only measure was the end-of-the-year test scores. If scores went up, the plan worked. If they went down, we assumed it didn’t. How naïve. We should have had checkpoints along the way, asking in October if the strategies were being implemented, in December what adjustments had been made, and in February what new issues had emerged that had to be addressed the following year. We should have kept track of our progress throughout the year.

5. *Don’t Lose Focus*

I was so easily distracted. As a district and school administrator, I was pulled in so many directions: building a new school, passing a bond issue: settling labor contracts, keeping the school board

happy. And we tried so many different strategies: reform models, smaller learning communities, Alpha Smarts, summer institutes, middle school block scheduling, and multiage grouping. It was hard to stay focused when there were so many demands and so many needs. I looked for shortcuts and rapid progress. And I confess that I sometimes confused importance with urgency.

What have I learned from those mistakes? I learned that a leader should choose carefully what to focus on and then stick with it. I know now that the smartest, most strategic plans have three or four goals, not six, not 10. I know that the urge to try something new is often born of a fear that we’ve chosen wrong and a frustration that we aren’t getting quick results. I got so caught up in moving forward that I stopped being reflective. I rarely paused to evaluate what we did. Did our summerlong, paid professional development for teachers really improve instruction? Did kids do better because they participated in our free summer school? Who knew? In hindsight, I see that moving forward and doing something innovative often won out over painstakingly measuring our progress and adjusting our strategies. My advice? Stay the course. Work the plan. Monitor progress and analyze results. It’s not glamorous; it doesn’t make headlines. But patience and persistence work when trying to achieve success at this most difficult of tasks.

6. *Don’t Neglect Personal Accountability*

Technically, I guess this doesn’t qualify as a mistake because it’s something I was never able to do. In all of my years in education, I never did devise a way to hold individual adults—including myself—accountable for the success of students. We were never able to say, “We can tie the performance of an individual teacher to the academic progress of his kids” or “We have ways to measure the impact of our district curriculum department on student achievement.” We said that student achievement was what we cared about most, but we observed, monitored, and evaluated employees based on everything but that.

What would I do this time around? I would find a way to personalize the responsibility each of us has for student achievement. In schools where large numbers of students are not achieving standards, we can assume that large numbers of teachers are not doing well either. And look at principals and superintendents. Lots of people get moved out of these positions, but how often really is it because student achievement doesn't improve on their watch? Isn't it usually because of politics, salary arguments, or personality conflicts? District office staff, too, not to mention employees of state departments of education: How do we know if what they do helps or hinders student achievement or in fact makes any difference at all? If I had it to do again, I would create an accountability chain that starts and ends with the student.

So that's my list of six things that you should never do when you're trying to improve schools. Probably not too many public speaking coaches would advise a keynoter to spend an hour talking about what he has done wrong throughout his career. But I didn't mean this speech to be depressing, and I hope you don't see it that way. I meant it to shine a light on what to do right—a light on how much more we know now than I did then about what works, especially in our most challenged schools. I hope you learn from my mistakes. Keep growing your knowledge and refining your practice. But don't stop believing that you can make a difference in the lives of kids. You can.



Administered by Learning Point Associates in partnership with the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) and WestEd, under contract with the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education of the U.S. Department of Education.

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