Successful Educational Leadership at High Performing Schools

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Successful educational leadership is not a random phenomenon, but an executed success which leaves clues whereby one can discover them. These clues lead to a desired destination—higher student achievement. Essential, non-negotiable elements have been identified. That is, each element has been systemically embedded at schools that have turned from low performing to high performing schools. These six elements/clues have been identified through decades of research and the author's leadership experience as superintendent in both urban and suburban districts. This paper names the actions of successful educational leaders, namely, the site principal, that results in increased student learning and achievement and that can be sustained overtime. These critical elements bring about increased numbers of students who are academically proficient and advanced as defined by the federal NCLB (No Child Left Behind) Act of 2001. Successful educational leaders understand the challenges of change, and they communicate a sense of urgency balanced with patience, persistence and optimism. There are no secrets to successful leadership, and success truly does leave clues. We know what must be done, and we can do the hard work to ensure that every child is successful. Let us share our clues and applaud our successes measured through the lens of students' academic achievement.

Keywords: high performing schools, increased student achievement, principal leadership

Introduction

Successful educational leadership has never been a random phenomenon, rather an executed success which leaves clues, whereby one can discover them. Like Hansel and Gretel leaving breadcrumbs through the forest, these clues lead to a desired destination—higher students' achievement. High performing schools have historically had strong leadership, namely the site principal.

Principal leadership has been known to be pivotal to a school's success and particularly critical in schools that have ranked persistently low performing over time, the greater the challenge, the greater the impact of leadership on teaching and learning. Research has demonstrated, and the author's own personal observations and knowledge elicited from sixteen years of service as superintendent for both urban and suburban school districts and as a member of a California DAIT (Department of Education District Assistance Intervention Team) have confirmed that schools rarely transform from low performing to effective and high performing schools unless the principal has been a strong and relentless leader (Leithwood, Seashore, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004).

Educational leaders who have been successful have committed themselves to doing whatever it takes to achieve their vision. Their schools' success can be studied and examined for the critical elements which result

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in increased numbers of students who are academically proficient and advanced. Proven strategies have begun to be identified in the 1970's by Ron Edmonds, Larry Lezotte and others. Lezotte (1991) developed a list of seven factors that were correlated with effective schools. The Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools reported on a five-year study in the 1990's of more than 1,500 K-12 schools that had improved students' learning using specific improvement initiatives. Marzano (2003) examined research conducted over 35 years and identified five school-based factors that positively impacted students' achievement. Reeves (2006) noted that improving schools and districts share at least six characteristics that produce higher students' achievement. Blanchard (2007) captured the lessons learned from his 25 years of consulting and found that the most effective organizations tended to fall into six basic areas.

Taking into account decades of research regarding the best educational leadership strategies, there were six critical factors that have been identified in the most productive schools. Success truly does leave clues. These six school-level factors are "non-negotiable", that is, each one has been systemically embedded at schools that have moved from underperforming to high performing schools.

Clue No. 1: An Agreed Upon Vision

A compelling and optimistic vision statement was created by all stakeholders, staff, parents and students that clearly indicated a picture of their shared aspirations and hopes for the school. The vision speaks to the powerful dreams and positive values voiced by the school community. The principal consistently communicated the vision for the school, and it was discussed at the opening of faculty meetings, school site council meetings, student leadership and parent meetings. This reminded the stakeholders to begin the work with the end in mind. The vision unified the team and clarified purpose as everyone channeled their efforts into making this singular dream a reality. There is unconditional commitment from staff to move the school forward in the areas of students' achievement and measurable outcomes.

The vision increased the sense of shared responsibility for all students' learning. Every staff member, classified and certificated, believed that all students can be academically successful. Curriculum, instruction and assessments of teaching and learning transformed the vision into actions. Many voices joined to create the vision statement and many are required to carry out the work. The vision statement created for Springfield High School, Springfield, Ohio declared:

> Unifying and serving the whole Springfield community, Springfield High School holds students at the center of all that we do. We are committed to creating a diverse, supportive, and exemplary learning environment. We are dedicated to offering a varied and demanding course of study in which all students succeed by exploring personal talents, developing life skills, and achieving at high academic levels. (Springfield City Schools Board of Education, 2006; Springfield, OH)

Clue No. 2: Instructional Leadership

From early on, successful principals have lived and breathed the role of the instructional leader, consistently communicating the school's visions and goals to staff, students, parents and community. Change has been inherent in transforming schools. The principals have understood change, its components and particularly why educators and other staff members resist change. During times of change and challenges, the shared vision has kept the school team moving in the same direction. Overcoming resistance to change has been facilitated through building relationships based on trust, credibility and connection to the shared vision of the school community. The quality of instruction has always been the key indicator of students' performance in

school, therefore, the principal engaged in work that supported teachers in improving instructional practices. This work has occurred in classrooms, not in the principal's office. Daily classroom walk-throughs are protected times, providing a structure for dialogue between principal and teacher about instructional practices (Downey et al., 2004). Successful instructional leaders have analyzed multiple sources of data to identify and improve instructional practices. The principal remained focused and stands firm on issues related to students' academic success and took direct responsibility for the quality of instructional program.

The staff recognized the increasing importance of academic standards and the need for all stakeholders to be held accountable. Staff members' expertise is recognized and utilized in leadership and grade level teams. Staff members have never lost sight of students who needed additional time and attention to achieve mastery of core content. All students have been provided a rigorous and relevant standards-based instructional program which, as needed, has included more time on academic content, i.e., zero periods, after school interventions, double blocking for math and language arts. School's and staff's success are measured through the lens of students' academic achievement.

Clue No. 3: A Safe, Orderly and Respectful Environment

Clear and consistent school rules and procedures must be in place regarding behaviors, with consistent consequences for violation of rules. The rules and procedures are created with student participation and reviewed frequently for their effectiveness in developing self-discipline and responsibility. Early detection of students who have high potential for extreme behaviors was in place and counselors and behavioral specialists provided assistance in re-engaging students in school. Public recognitions for exemplary behavior and scholarship need to be acknowledged. A safe, orderly campus has paved the way for respectful behaviors. There needs to be continuity and predictability from one classroom to another. There must be a purpose for being in school and an understanding, "we are in business of teaching/learning".

This premise has to be communicated to staff, students and parents from day one and reinforced in classroom procedures and instructional activities. One widely used educational framework for teaching respectful behaviors is the "six pillars of character" (Glassman & Josephson, 2008). The six pillars of character have been cited as: trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring and citizenship, which need to be taught at each grade level in the context of fostering self-discipline and academic achievement. A middle school program, Capturing Kids' Hearts, provides tools for administrators and staff to build positive, productive and trusting relationships among themselves and with their students. Capturing Kids' Hearts brought to mind how important respectful relationships and connections are between adults and students (Meyer & Flippen, 2006).

Clue No. 4: Timely Monitoring of Student Progress

Curriculum and instruction are aligned with district and state standards. Students' progress has been measured with frequent and meaningful assessments in correlation with the guaranteed curriculum. Teachers have gathered evidence of students' learning from classroom and district data to monitor individual student's progress. Students' achievement data were analyzed and openly shared among teachers to facilitate the improvement of individual and collective performance. Daily instruction has been proven to be pivotal in regard to the effective use of data at the classroom level. Data are used to group and re-group students, for a

continual practice throughout the year. Students who have needed additional support and time are quickly identified and needs are addressed. The challenge to ensure academic success for all students required re-thinking current students' support systems, resources and personnel. The principal has authority, responsibility, and accountability from the superintendent and board of education regarding flexibility of staffing, professional development, budget, scheduling and instructional programs to ensure student success. Regular and clear communications, delivered in a variety of ways to students and families about the students' academic status and learning needs, have affirmed the importance of school-family collaboration (Epstein, 2001). All students know where they are in the progression of steps to meet their learning targets and what evidence will be required to demonstrate mastery. Systematic interventions have required students to devote extra time and receive additional assistance until they have mastered necessary concepts. This time equals an additional opportunity to learn. Interventions are not by invitation, rather by direction, i.e., small group tutoring, guided study rooms and double periods for math and English language arts, parent/student/teacher contracts defining goals, expectations and responsibilities for academic improvement (Richard DuFour, Rebecca DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). The curriculum and instruction during interventions are aligned to the standards-based instruction in the classroom. Students' learning is monitored to determine if interventions are effective or if other resources are necessary.

Clue No. 5: Professional Learning Communities

Professional communities of learners at each grade level and content area share experiences that promote continuous learning. A culture of collaboration and teamwork has been based on an agreed set of beliefs and values evidenced by the school's vision statement. Shared decision-making has been apparent among staff and administrators. Targeted and focused professional development of promising instructional practices and the analysis and understanding of data was facilitated at the school level. The principal addressed the time for reflection, inquiry, sharing knowledge and data regarding students through flexibility of time, people and resources, i.e., scheduling common preparation periods by grade or content, banking of instructional minutes to create early release day and minimizing school-wide staff meetings. Teachers have opportunities to practice and refine what they have learned in a continuous process of improvement.

PLCs (professional learning communities) (DuFour et al., 2004) address three crucial questions that drive the work of those within a PLC:

(1) What do we want each student to learn?

(2) How will we know when each student has learned it?

(3) How will we respond when a student experiences difficulty in learning?

Staff members work together to clarify what each student must learn. Effective instructional methodologies are implemented so that all students benefit. School wide goals and specific goals for individual students are set. Common assessments are developed for each grade/content and each student's learning is monitored on a timely basis. School-wide interventions are targeted to students who need to master critical concepts. PLCs judge their effectiveness on the basis of results. Failure is not an option for staff or students.

Clue No. 6: School and Family Partnerships

Partnerships have implied mutual trust and respect, two-way collaboration and support and equality in the

relationship. Evidence has indicated a strong connection between parent and family involvement in schools and children's academic achievement, attendance, attitude and continued education (Epstein, 1994). However, parents may not become involved if perceived barriers are present. An effective school climate is one that makes families feel welcomed, respected, trusted and needed. Students have frequent opportunities to see families and school staff members interact positively and respectfully. Family involvement activities are directly linked to the curriculum and student learning. Successful school leaders have understood the overlapping spheres of influence between the home and school and found ways for the school to become an extension of the family, providing continuity between the two settings. Epstein (1994) created a framework of six basic levels of parent involvement:

(1) The basic obligations of parents responsibilities of families to ensure children's health and safety, to the skills needed to prepare children for school and support learning at each grade level;

(2) The basic obligations of schools effective communications from school to home about programs and children's academic and social progress;

(3) Parent involvement at school parent volunteers who assist teachers/children at school, and who support students' performances, sports and attend programs for their own education;

(4) Parent involvement in learning activities at home parents monitor or assist their own children at home on learning activities from the school;

(5) Parent involvement in governance and advocacy parents take decision-making roles in parent/school organizations at school, district or state level;

(6) Collaborating with communit parents seek to integrate various community agencies and resources to strengthen school program.

Successful principals think "outside of the box" in regard to the varied communications, personal connections and activities they must implement K-12 to build strong partnerships with families, particularly the hard to reach or reluctant parent.

Conclusion

Success leaves clues. Each clue is critical, the path to transforming a low performing school into a community of learners requires a real sense of urgency balanced with patience, persistence, dedicated focus, optimism, honesty and celebrations of success along the way. One can draw on those educational leaders who have postulated those clues in regard to improving student achievement that will be sustained over time in the most challenging schools. One can build on prior experiences and personal strengths with proven strategies.

There is no secret sauce, no secret strategies or magic bullets to successful educational leadership. There is "knowing"—knowing for sure what has been proven over and over again to produce desired outcomes and there is "doing"—doing the work. You have the challenge and opportunity to do the hard work and impact your world. No matter what has happened or how bumpy the road gets, never, ever, give up. Share your successes and be sure to leave clues for others to follow.

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