

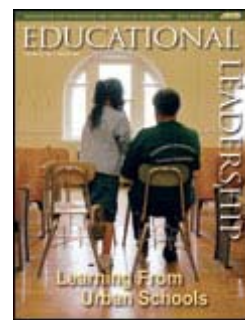
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A Leadership Journey

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The road to improvement takes the staff of a high-poverty urban school from isolation to collaboration.

In the summer of 1999, I was appointed principal of John Williams Elementary School No. 5 in Rochester, New York. I was excited and invigorated by the challenge of my first principalship.

But my excitement was quickly tempered by reality. During my first on-site visit, I was overwhelmed by the terrible physical condition of the school. I saw filthy cafeteria walls with peeling paint, food stains everywhere, and window shades held together with masking tape. I wondered, How could the superintendent do this to me?

That feeling was reinforced after the district officially announced my appointment. Friends and colleagues offered few positive statements about the school. The school's only claims to fame were the tragic killing of a teacher in the gym by a troubled student in the 1980s, the discovery of a dead body in a dumpster behind the school in the early 1990s, and the lowest student test scores in the city: a 13 percent passing rate on the New York State English Language Arts Exam and a 24 percent passing rate on the New York State Math Exam. Students in the school spoke approximately 23 languages, and 91 percent were eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

After drying my tears, I realized that change needed to happen and that I would need serious help from the entire school staff to create a cohesive learning community. My leadership journey had begun.

Setting the Stage for Change

During that first summer, I met with teams of teachers and discovered that they were highly dissatisfied with the school's conditions and practices. This dissatisfaction provided the energy we needed to initiate change.

When the school year opened, the staff returned to a building that had undergone a transformation. Friends, family, the custodial staff, and the head secretary had rallied to help clean, paint, and decorate the school, creating a physical environment in which all stakeholders could feel comfortable. At the first staff meeting, teachers greeted me with applause for the work that we had accomplished during the summer.

Capitalizing on these good spirits, I asked the staff to accept personal responsibility for finding positive solutions to the school's problems. To get the improvement process started, I created a photo journal of the remaining poor physical conditions in the school and submitted it to the central office, asking for support. I also applied for and received more than \$100,000 in grant funds from such organizations as 21st Century and Ametek. At the same time, teachers looked together at the budget and discussed how to reallocate funds so that we would invest less money in workbooks and more money in engaging, interactive materials.

We rapidly received a significant influx of resources. For the first time, teachers had adequate instructional materials and did not need to rely on whatever they could hide among themselves and save from year to year. Our computer capacity increased from one computer lab with equipment dating back to the 1980s to new computers with Internet access in the lab and in all classrooms. Grants enabled us to obtain the resources to support innovative, research-based instructional practices, such as guided reading and literature circles.

These changes—targeting the physical work environment and resources needed to improve teaching practices—were important and visible first steps that showed students, teachers, and parents that we were on our way to meaningful improvement.

Collaboration: Establishing a Process

As we took a critical look at how the school operated, we discovered that the lack of collaboration was a major obstacle to improvement. For the most part, English as a second language (ESL), general education, special-subject, and special education teachers interacted only with colleagues in their own area of concentration. Teachers worked in isolation. Special-interest groups among the staff vied for the power to develop the master schedule from year to year.

Clearly, we needed to identify goals, values, and beliefs that we all shared and that we could demonstrate in our actions. To begin this process, we developed seven specialized committees—building, diversity, scheduling, school climate, technology, school-based planning, and curriculum mapping—for which teachers volunteered.

To ensure that every voice would be heard, I established guidelines and processes for effective communication. For example, I advocated active listening, a commitment to truth and courtesy, and simple, clear communication. These new understandings enabled staff members to move beyond self-interest and to dramatically change their ways of interacting with one another. We also helped establish a common purpose by

- Posting throughout the school informational bulletin boards displaying such content as school test data, a math problem of the week, and positive messages written by staff members to one another.
- Displaying in every classroom a poster listing five essential elements for developing a sense of community: capacity, collective effort, care, chronicles, and celebration. We focused on one of these words every week. For example, students would read the word and its meaning over the public address system during morning announcements.
- Developing and posting best instructional practice posters, naming specific teachers whom I had identified during classroom observations as experts in such areas as phonics instruction, research-based literacy, and student relationships. These experts were available to advise and assist their colleagues.
- Posting the school improvement plan on all three levels of the building. The School-Based Planning Committee annually updates this plan, which is based on guidelines provided by the school district.

We also created multiple new opportunities for educators to share their expertise during the course of the school day. For example, we started implementing Principal Promise Assemblies several times a year, during which administrators take charge of the student body for one and one-half hours while teachers meet in inquiry groups, attend workshops, conduct peer observations, and visit other schools to observe best practices.

We also moved to integrate the work of special education, ESL, and general education teachers. We reduced the number of self-contained special education classrooms from 15 to 4, and added 11 inclusive classes. We mainstreamed English language learners into inclusive classrooms. We created a new master schedule that provided common planning time by grade level twice a week for 45 minutes, during which general education, special education, ESL, and speech teachers work together.

Capacity: Creating a Workable Organization

In the past, entrenched “I” behaviors had crippled the school. Teachers had taken responsibility only for their individual classroom management and instruction and felt little ownership for what occurred throughout the rest of the school.

To change this pattern, I challenged everyone—teachers, paraprofessionals, union leaders, parents, clerical workers, food service staff, and custodial staff—to elevate their focus beyond self-interest to a concern for the well-being of all students. To identify the areas that staff members believed were in the most urgent need of attention, I administered a survey that asked, “What are the two best things about the school that a new principal should know?” and “What two things do we need to work on or change right now?” Responses indicated that teachers were most concerned about inadequate resources (computers, textbooks, and classroom supplies); schoolwide discipline; and the lack of recognition of student and staff achievements. The survey results helped us shape our efforts to improve professional development.

We established numerous professional development opportunities focused on analyzing the existing school climate and instructional practices. For example, 30 teachers volunteered to attend our first Summer Advancement Planning Session, a two-day retreat. We also attended many national conferences.

We instituted peer coaching, on-site coaching, and weekly discussion groups in which grade-level facilitators use achievement data to inform their teams about best practices. During these groups' meetings, teachers analyze student work, align curriculum goals, model and share best instructional practices, read professional articles, and reflect on their practice.

As a result, we adopted innovative, research-based strategies designed to improve student behavior and learning. For example, our Strategic Intervention Team—composed of the principal, the assistant principal, special education and general education teachers, our speech therapist, parents, and our social worker—evaluates individual students who are experiencing difficulties and suggests strategies that teachers can use to intervene with students before referring them for special education evaluation.

Other innovations that we developed on the basis of our collective analysis of schoolwide needs include

- A School Instructional Handbook, outlining professional practice guidelines to promote consistency and continuity of teaching and assessment.
- Effective discipline strategies, such as the Second Chance Intervention Room, where students either are assigned or choose to go for character education and reflection, and Community ConneCTime, an alternative to suspension in which students in grades 3–6 work at a community service agency, write about the experience, and present information to peers.

- After-school programs, such as the Bobcat College after-school program, designed to address students' multiple learning styles, and the Bobcat Adult College Program, designed to promote parents' skills in parenting, technology, and literacy.
- Curriculum Fair Family Fun Night, a special event that includes carnival activities and focuses on helping parents understand what their children will be learning.

Challenge: High Academic Expectations

Helping people change themselves and their thinking is a difficult task. Many times, I dealt with confused, stressed-out, cynical employees who wanted to do better but did not believe in their own potential or in the potential of their students. I learned to really listen to people, acknowledging their feelings without judgment. Gradually, we began to analyze and challenge our beliefs about student learning.

As a result of such efforts, we began to spend time analyzing student data and aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment, with an in-depth focus on how students learn. All teachers now work together to incorporate preparation for state assessments into their curriculums.

For example, the New York State Social Studies Assessments contain many questions that ask students to interpret such political or social documents as articles, editorials, and cartoons. Students need to become familiar with answering such document-based questions (DBQs). To help prepare students for these assessments, our social studies teachers designed DBQs on Somalians from a current newspaper article. The art teacher used this same format to have students analyze artworks that depicted historical events. The physical education teacher implemented orienteering lessons to help students with the mapping and math skills that would be assessed on the state tests.

Commitment: Monitoring Student Progress

At our school, we use formal and informal methods to measure student achievement. For example, after observing a high-performing school in Chicago, we implemented five- to eight-week assessments, designed at the school level, to identify skills that students lack and to focus instruction on those skills. We also implemented the 100 Book Challenge, which encourages daily reading of leveled text at school and in the home. As students move through leveled reading text, the program continually analyzes, monitors, and measures their reading abilities to ensure student progress. Student self-assessment also plays a significant role in helping students take responsibility for the quality and quantity of their work. Students assess their writing, for instance, through rubrics and by presenting their drafts for peer analysis.

Traveling Toward Excellence

Because of our ability to unite in our efforts, John Williams Elementary School No. 5 has experienced a significant increase in student achievement. Scores on New York State's exams increased from a 74.4 index score to a 159.0 index score during a four-year period. In 2003, the school was cited by the New York State Business Council as one of the 24 most improved schools in the state, and received the National School Change Award from the U.S. Department of Education and Fordham University. During the current school year, we are in "Good Standing" with the state education department and we continue to meet our adequate yearly progress goals.

As a result of our move from isolation to collaboration, we are creating pathways to excellence and becoming a high-performing organization in which human success is limitless. As principal, my continuing leadership journey involves providing a respectful, supportive environment in which all members of the school community can strive for continual improvement.

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