

structural and cultural shifts *to change the status quo*

If our schools are to compensate for what needy students lack, two sets of changes must occur: structural and cultural, and you can't implement one without the other.

More than 25,000 people typically run the Los Angeles Marathon. If you have ever run or watched the event, and given it conscious attention, you would have noticed that few, if any, participants ran the 26.2 asphalt miles barefoot, or with only one shoe. This is hardly remarkable, given the conditions and length of the event, and most participants' goal of finishing, or finishing in a specific time frame.

Yet, traditional schools, given the lofty goal of having all students attain proficiency on rigorous content standards, are essentially running a barefoot marathon.

The traditional school serves some students very well. If students begin kindergarten with pre-literacy experiences historically typical of middle-class children – according to Clay (1972) and Adams (1990), somewhere between 2,000 to 3,000 hours of scribbling, coloring, drawing, being read to and handling books – they will probably read

successfully by the end of elementary school; in fact, by the end of third grade.

Schools are custom-made for these students – those very like the children of the middle-class, fluent-English-speaking teachers who staff them.

Students who proceed to the secondary level with at least grade-level literacy and numeracy skills, intrinsic motivation and/or strong parental oversight of homework and grades, and enough emotional connection to school (to friends, co-curricular or extra-curricular activities, or even an interested adult) have a fair chance of successfully attaining proficiency in core curriculum, passing the CAHSEE, and attaining a diploma.

But today's schools are expected to create success for every student, and large numbers

By Terry Wilhelm

enter and continue through school without all – or perhaps any – of these important experiences and characteristics. A year of traditional half-day kindergarten totals about 540 hours. Students who enter kindergarten 2,000 to 3,000 hours behind their peers have little hope of catching up without a program intentionally designed to dramatically accelerate them.

As they progress through school and the curriculum grows in complexity, they become exponentially behind. Middle school teachers wonder what was going on in elementary school that resulted in so many unprepared students arriving in their classrooms, and high school teachers likewise wonder what was going on in middle school.

Retention is not the answer. Decades of studies clearly show that retained students do not catch up. Worse, retained students are much more likely to drop out of high school. In a comprehensive survey of the literature and research on dropouts, Shannon Wells of Key Data Systems (2008) cites research that found retaining once increases dropout risk by 40 to 50 percent; twice, by 90 percent.

If schools are to compensate for what these needy students lack, two sets of changes must occur. One is structural. The other is cultural. While they are somewhat independent of each other, implementing only one and not the other is to assign the probability of success for all students that of running a marathon with one shoe. Maintaining status quo is to run the marathon barefoot.

The left shoe: Structural changes

Following 1980s business practices, education has moved toward re-designing its institutions as “learning organizations.” Author/speakers like Richard and Rebecca DuFour and Robert Eaker have brought huge popularity to this movement, known as Professional Learning Communities.

As schools work toward becoming PLCs, many build time into the contract day for teacher collaborations – a positive development. However, providing time for collaborations that do not result in changed daily classroom practice is like having a group of runners discuss the best kind of running shoes to buy – even going so far as to examine data on various shoes – without

ever buying a pair. Schools that have only taken the step of building time into teachers’ schedules sometimes say, “We’re doing PLCs.” Richard DuFour and others refer to this as “PLC Lite.”

Supporting collaboration

In the 1970s, when cooperative learning was new, teachers often complained that students were unable to cooperate, so they returned to having the students sit in rows and work alone. Students need explicit instruction in how to work together. They need support learning the skills of cooperating, or they will be unable to work on the curricular content of the cooperative learning activity.

Similarly, because education for over a hundred years has been a solitary profession

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characterized by private practice, teachers need support in learning to work collaboratively.

Initially, teacher teams need staff development and coaching in the drafting and monitoring of formal group norms, analysis of student achievement data, collaborative examination of student work, and use of formalized discussion protocols.

PLC collaboration in a course-alike team is very different from a traditional department meeting or grade-level meeting. Housekeeping details of day-to-day running of a grade level or department do not belong in teacher collaborations.

Only as teams develop in sophistication with data, and trust among members, do discussions in collaborative meetings translate to improved classroom practice. This requires a collective commitment to actually implement agreed-upon strategies, or even the most sophisticated discussions have no

impact on teaching and learning. As teams advance, administrators and academic coaches need to support them in closing the knowing-doing gap between discussions and classroom practice.

The structural – “left shoe” – aspect of PLCs is the development of the “pyramid of interventions” – a systematic way of providing extra time and support for students who need it, academically or behaviorally. It is represented graphically by a pyramid, with numbers of students served at each level diminishing, the tip of the pyramid usually including special education placement.

This is entirely consistent with the current, changed orientation toward special education as a whole, termed Response to Intervention (RtI). Traditionally, students

were identified for special education services using a “discrepancy model,” in which students qualified for services after a long period of failure, demonstrating a discrepancy in innate (IQ) ability and academic performance. The newer model of RtI – having a pyramid of interventions in place in a school – is to provide a safety net of support for every student to prevent failure in the first place.

Teachers’ beliefs about teaching and learning – the basis of a school’s culture – factor into developing the pyramid of interventions/RtI. A basic misunderstanding is demonstrated when teachers enthusiastically ask, “Where do I get to send all these kids who can’t do anything in my class, and when are they going?”

The key understanding that needs to be developed is that best first teaching is the base of the pyramid! Furthermore, it is the collaborative teams of teachers who

first consider and develop strategies among themselves to reach and teach as many students as possible. These lower, foundational levels of the pyramid must be in place for the system to function (respond).

The master schedule

The daily or master schedule is the key to building the succeeding levels of the pyramid. Trying to build a pyramid of interventions without changing the architecture of the master schedule is like runners changing T-shirts, but still running in bare feet.

Inviting low-performing students to stay after school for support does not typically work. Those who most need to stay, don't. Even for those who do stay, after-school interventions are not usually designed to systematically prepare students for daily core instruction. At best, they may offer homework help, tutoring, or a standalone study skills curriculum.

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Research on students who have holes in their skill development suggests the best way to ensure success is through "scaffolding" – pre-teaching that directly supports what students will encounter in the day's core lesson.

– pre-teaching that directly supports what students will encounter in the day's core lesson. Daily pre-teaching (at the secondary level, a daily pre-teach period) is a systemic, systematic intervention.

Recent research by the Noyce Foundation (2008) found that the optimum gain from the high school pre-teach period was through scheduling it just before the core period, and ensuring that students had the same teacher for the pre-teach as they had

for the core lesson, with grade-level/benchmark peers joining the core period.

Students who are behind fall into two broad categories of need: those less than two years behind, who can be supported with daily pre-teaching of the core material, and those who are more than two years behind or who are just beginning to speak English.

In English language arts, it is impossible to expect that a high school English teacher in a 55-minute period can meet the needs of students who are new to English or read at an early middle school or elementary level, even with a daily pre-teach of the key elements of the lesson. The same problem exists for middle school and upper elementary.

In mathematics, students who need to master Algebra I, but who have not yet mastered key skills and concepts of kindergarten through seventh grade, need more than a daily pre-teach; they need a side-by-side intensive skills class to "fill in the holes."

For both English and mathematics, students more than two years behind need placements in daily, intensive programs – usually double-blocked at the secondary level – to accelerate them to a level where they can return to core placement, supported by a daily pre-teach block.

For example, "replacement curriculums" in English language arts have been approved by the State Board of Education for students in grade 4 and above who are more than two years behind. Intensive mathematics curriculums have more recently been approved.

High school students in double-blocked interventions need a systemic response to support credit recovery if they are to graduate on schedule, such as evening classes, a re-tooling of traditional summer school programs, or online classes.

In secondary schools, the traditional master schedule will be impacted when the pyramid of interventions is systemically infused. This may be an unfortunate metaphor in these difficult economic times, but there is truly no free lunch here. Schools have changed very little since the Industrial Revolution.

High schools are arguably the strongest bastion of tradition in the American educational system, and many middle schools are based on the same structures. Districts allo-

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cate staffing for schools based on formulas that may have been used for decades.

In most cases, putting double-blocked classes into the master schedule means one of two things, and usually requires a combination of both: short-term additional staffing beyond what the district traditionally allocates to its schools, and/or temporary elimination of some current offerings in order to reallocate staff.

Either added staff or reallocation is temporary. As students are accelerated to the point where they can succeed in core classes without extra support, the support sections are collapsed, and any dropped courses can be restored. When feeder schools system-wide build interventions into students' school day, this happens more quickly than when a secondary school makes this structural change solo.

Hard-working, engaged students

At Jurupa Valley High School in Riverside, statistics compiled by mathematics coach Nate Haas show that feeder school interventions, after only one year of full imple-



mentation, are supporting the reduction of double-blocked math sections at JVHS.

The first year of double-blocked intensive Read 180 classes, the team exited an entire class of students after only one semester. Language arts coach Marie Mains discusses individual students in English core-plus-support with their teachers to determine which might be candidates to drop their

support block. During accreditation, JVHS students told the visiting team that they worked hard in their support classes so that they could exit and get their electives back!

Principal Ilsa Garza-Gonzalez welcomes visitors, who find students in pre-teach classes highly engaged, with teachers using effective instructional strategies beyond lecture and note-taking. It is not unusual to observe these students outperforming their peers during the core lesson.

Difficult choices

In the face of our fiscal crisis, added FTEs seem an impossible dream, and temporarily eliminating certain electives, or under-enrolled sections of specialized classes such as AP in high school, are always propositions met with great dismay.

This is not to suggest that adding double blocks to the master schedule is the only answer to serving all students. Significantly increasing online classes, creating virtual schools, and expanding schooling hours for all students beyond the parameters of a traditional school day are models worth

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exploring. But if the decision is to stick with the schools and structures we currently have, the school and district must make a difficult choice.

One option is to maintain status quo, and continue to serve a select few students very well, while allowing many others to continue to flounder and fail. The other is to make temporary but difficult fiscal and program choices to provide a successful program for all. In that case, there is no escaping the need for the left shoe.

The right shoe: Cultural shifts

We might think of cultural shifts as the whole-child, right-brain aspect of outfitting for this marathon – the right shoe. The Search Institute (2003) has found that the lowest-performing students are so disconnected to school that improved instructional practices may have little or no impact on their learning.

Some teacher survey instruments designed to measure a school's culture begin with the statement – using a rating scale or

true/false response – “I believe all students can learn and achieve.” Such statements commonly begin school mission statements. These surveys may contain 10-20 questions or more to ascertain the nature of a school's culture.

However, in my experience, teacher responses to only one additional statement can provide the most telling information: “It is my responsibility to ensure that every one of my students masters the learning of my course.” Teachers' answers to this question will typically reflect not only their beliefs, but their instructional practices and their behavior toward students.

Teachers who believe that it is their responsibility to ensure that students learn are those who make personal connections with kids; those who feel it is not, typically don't, and at the secondary level, may never even learn the names of all the students in their classes. Either way, collectively, this defines the school's culture.

Schools' overall cultures range from positive to laissez-faire, to negative to highly

negative. Sometimes a school culture is so negative – actually toxic – that a visitor can feel it simply by walking into the front office or the teacher's lounge or workroom.

Schools with highly negative cultures may also be characterized by antagonism between teachers and administrators, sometimes exacerbated or smoke-screened by union issues; ironic, given that we are all supposedly on the same team. Negative remarks in the staff lounge and elsewhere target administration, students and parents.

“Negaholics” can dominate

But even schools with overall positive or affect-neutral cultures normally contain a certain number of “negaholics,” who tend to gravitate toward each other and feed off each other's negative energy whenever they are in a group setting. It is not unusual to find that they also are more vocal, and sometimes these vocal few are allowed to dominate staff meetings, department meetings, and time set aside for team collaborations.

Members of the silent majority, intimidated by these individuals, and taking their cues from the administrative leaders, do not confront their colleagues.

Schools can certainly make inroads into the problem of staff negativity through courageous leadership. However, this rests on the principal's willingness to explicitly and repeatedly state the expectation of professionalism in all settings – “no negativity” – in whatever terms are congruent with the leader's style.

However, although clearly stating the expectation is absolutely critical, it is not sufficient. An essential, parallel leadership action required to change the culture is to hold potentially uncomfortable, private, face-to-face conversations with recalcitrant staff.

Middle school principal Susan Boyd in the Alvord Unified School District in Riverside often begins these conversations by saying, “This is the perception ...” Author Robert Sutton (2007) writes, “Sometimes the jerk doesn't realize he's being a jerk.”

Obviously, it is incumbent upon the leader to hold these conversations in a manner that models the professionalism the individual lacks: private and respectful, yet

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firm. Some individuals will try to use denial, argument or rationalization to defend their behavior.

Boyd often simply asks, “How can I help you with this?” This question allows the leader to avoid being drawn into an argument or to have to verbally “prove” who is right or wrong. However, it is essential to be very clear on what is unacceptable, and what is expected (“It is not acceptable to refer to kids as “worthless.” I expect you to use professional language when discussing students. And remember that at our school, we don’t blame the kids.”).

If the individual continues to deny or argue, sometimes the best response is a broken record (“We don’t label kids as worthless, and we don’t blame the kids for not learning.”).

Although they cannot abdicate responsibility for setting the expectation of professionalism and holding staff accountable to it, administrators cannot reverse a negative culture alone.

Building teacher leaders

A third dimension of this effort is to build the capacity of excellent teachers to become teacher leaders. This goes beyond the traditional role of a department chair or grade-level lead. Teachers are already stepping forward to become team leaders of collaborative teacher teams, facilitating discussions about student learning and instructional practices. Teacher leaders can become a strong, positive presence, refusing to be steamrolled by negative peers. They can set a precedent that gives others the courage to follow their lead.

After a year’s training with her leadership team, which included teacher-leadership skills, principal Marcy Hale in the Jurupa Unified School District said, “It’s not just my voice anymore,” as she described her teacher leaders stepping up and supporting and advocating for changes based on student needs, not merely adult preferences.

Finally, principals who succeed in reversing a negative culture do so through building whole-staff ownership of changed structures (the “left shoe”) that will support all students. This is an over-arching endeavor that is carried out simultaneously with stating

expectations, holding individuals accountable, and developing teacher leaders.

Skilled principals exercise a strategy termed “creating demand” by Mid-Continent Research in Education and Learning (McREL, 2001). Using study groups to examine research and best practices, arranging



guided field trips to effective schools, and attending powerful staff development with teams of teachers, a principal can promote ownership of the change effort that is shaped by teachers themselves, guided by administrators.

Retired principal Sharon Blakely turned around her low-performing school in Orange County using all of these strategies to create a culture of shared ownership for student achievement.

Coming to consensus

Ownership is stronger than buy-in. Many principals can name one or more teachers who have never quite “bought in” to specific policies, procedures or norms. A potential pitfall in trying to bring teachers along in a change effort is to use voting to determine whether an initiative moves forward. Although the initiative may “pass,” it may also fail.

Voting puts pressure on the quieter fence-sitters who are easily intimidated, and likely to succumb to pressure they feel from the negaholics. Even if the majority votes “yes,” those who voted “no” may still feel entitled to object or flout the decision. After all, they didn’t vote for it.

Although voting can work, developing consensus – though a more time-consuming process – is a much stronger vehicle for gaining ownership. It puts pressure where it belongs – on the negaholics. Continuing a discussion while asking for overt indications (e.g. “Please indicate with a fist to five

what your level of support is right now.”), the leader continues to ask each of those lagging behind, “What will it take to make this an initiative you can support?”

While the goal is not to attain a “five” with 100 percent of the staff, the goal is to get everyone beyond a fist (zero) or one, and hopefully to at least a three. The leader sums up the discussion with a statement like, “Although not everyone is at a five, almost everyone is at least at a three, with a couple of twos. In consensus, we all agree to support the decision once we leave this room, and not to sabotage it or hold parking-lot conversations undermining it.” The leader’s obligation, if those things occur, is that private, one-to-one conversation with the individual.

It is easy to forget that adults, like students, sometimes “misbehave” to cover up inadequacies, or fear of having their inadequacies exposed. Although a particular individual may seem to have a penchant for resisting just for the sake of resisting, it is entirely possible that he does not possess the skill set to execute the initiative.

A good self-question for the leader (after counting to 10, if necessary) is, “Do

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I just need to ratchet up the accountability for him, or does he actually (or also) need support?” Perhaps he needs staff development, coaching, planning time or materials. Boyd’s question, “How can I help you?” can open unexpected vistas into such individuals’ behavior.

However, turning a blind eye and hoping the person will, at some point, either see the light or ask for help is typically not an effective leadership strategy for the long-term success of the initiative. One of the most encouraging by-products of holding a difficult staff member accountable – including providing support for him, as needed – is the shot in the arm it gives to teachers who are trying to do the right thing. Although the principal cannot share these difficult, private conversations, it is nearly certain that the individual will. It bolsters the others’ beliefs in the probability of success, and it strengthens their confidence in the leader.

McREL has identified 21 research-based practices of effective principals, shown to have a significant impact on student achievement. One of them, termed “relationships,” is to know about individual teachers’ personal lives, which may be impacting their teaching. Clearly, professional relationships are also important to effective leadership, but this responsibility focuses on the personal aspects of relationships.

Just as a student becomes more connected to school when even one adult connects with him personally, the personal interest and concern of the leader can make a difference in a teacher’s commitment in working at the site. Just as teachers’ relationships with students prevent a large measure of discipline problems, a principal’s genuine caring and demonstrated concern for individual staff will go a long way toward building trust and a spirit of cooperation.

It is important to consider a less overt but also very damaging potential aspect of school culture for students: one of low expectations, a topic deserving a treatise of its own. Author/consultant Dennis Parker (1994) has referred to low expectations as


the “*poor mijo*” syndrome. This can occur in any kind of school, including those that may actually have a warm and loving atmosphere, with adults concerned for students’ self-esteem. However, coursework may lack in rigor, with the excuse that “the kids just can’t do it and we don’t want them to feel like failures.”

But for students to gain true self-confidence – positive self-esteem as learners –

they must experience mastery of challenging material. This requires a belief by the staff in its own ability to, as a team, create success for all students, termed “collective efficacy” by researcher Roger Goddard (2001).

The collaborative work of Goddard and McREL shows that a staff’s collective efficacy can be developed and enhanced by a skilled principal. PLCs are the optimum vehicle for

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teachers to begin to realize that “together we can accomplish what none of us can accomplish alone.”

Schools that hope to successfully and consistently complete this marathon for every student must be well-outfitted for the challenge. Equal attention must be paid to developing both culture and structure that support students. To run with one shoe is both painful and ineffective. To run barefoot, it is impossible to attain the goal, and failure is not an option under NCLB, or for any leader who feels what Michael Fullan (2003) has termed the “moral imperative” of leading work of this profession.

Leaders must summon the courage and resources to move beyond the traditions of more than a century. Only then is there hope for achievement and success for all. ■

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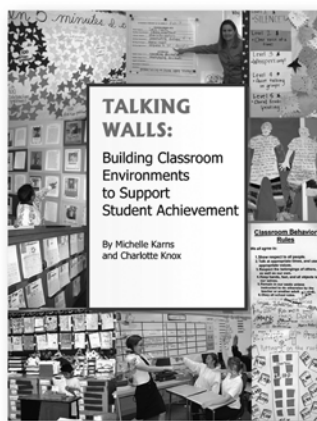


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