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Focused on Learning: Four Critical Questions to which Every Educator Should have the Answers

The Purpose of School

Creating and sustaining a world-class educational system for students does not occur by happenstance. A team of dedicated and reflective teachers, administrators and other professionals, as well as strategic partners, is a requisite criterion to ensure the continued buoyancy of a vibrant and progressive school system. In the process, instructional leaders must work with their teams to develop and update their vision and mission statements to reflect an emphasis on high levels of student learning. The vision statement should articulate the direction in which the organization is heading, while the mission must exemplify the purpose of school.

Research findings indicate that failing schools begin to see progress when they systematically become focused on learning rather than on teaching. A first step in this process is a concerted, collaborative activity where individuals and teams of individuals engage cooperatively at developing a unified mission statement that holistically embraces student learning.

Supportively, Austin Buffum, Mike Mattos, and Chris Weber (2009) provide a six-step approach for schools and school districts to create a “Learning Mission” that encapsulates two fundamental assumptions: 1) a belief among educators that all students have the capacity to attain high levels of learning, and 2) the personal acceptance by educators to make this learning outcome achievable for every child. Through this visionary process, the true purpose of school will surface and a new focus on learning will evolve.

Cornerstone Pillars for Learning

Although seemingly simplistic, the process of redirecting schools from an emphasis on how well teachers teach to how well students learn reflects an epic shift, albeit not a novel one, in educational policy and practice. At the core of this impetus there must be a keen focus on three “cornerstone pillars”: student academic achievement, improved positive school culture, and improved teacher and leader effectiveness. Conceptually, educators may envision the cornerstone pillars positioned on the distinct, ground-level points of a pyramid. The pyramid represents the school system, which can be one school or an entire school district.

Academic achievement is inextricably interconnected to the other two pillars. Undeniably, students are academically successful and positive school cultures thrive when teachers and leaders are effective. Mike Schmoker (2011) supports that effective teachers are the single most determinant of success for students. The reality also is that instructional leaders do influence school culture, which affects students' performance. Robert Eaker and Deborah Gonzales (2006) indicate that effective leadership is necessary to ensure effective schooling. They further sagely assert that neglecting organizational culture results in certain school failure.

Professional Learning Communities

School leaders are increasingly pursuing and implementing the powerful model of professional learning communities to engage staff in school improvement activities Hinman (2006) and to build their teams within and around the pillars of academic achievement, school culture, and teacher and leader effectiveness. A PLC is a community of persons who share similar goals, practices, beliefs, interests, and value systems and who act strategically, cohesively, and collaboratively to accomplish one or more desired objective with a clear focus on student learning.

The driving force behind learning communities is teamwork. As Mike Schmoker (2006) explains, "true teamwork entails: a regular schedule of formal meetings where teachers focus on the details of their lessons and adjust them on the basis of assessment results." (p. 108). The quality of the conversations that occur within PLC teams determine the eventual sustenance and strength of the overall pyramid/organization.

It is within these communities that the four critical questions to which every educator should have the answers are to be discussed. The seeds for these collaborative conversations should be planted by instructional leaders at both the district and school-based levels. This is not to imply that learning communities are to be structured based on organizational hierarchy with a rigid adherence to a prescriptive formula. DuFour (2003) recommends a loose-tight strategy, also referred to as "directed autonomy" that provides clear priorities and guidelines while allowing schools the flexibility to chart their paths to success. Instructional leaders, however, have the duty to provide structure within which constructive dialogue can take place that focuses on student learning.

Four Critical Questions

It is paramount that every professional in the building, within their learning communities, are having planned and ongoing discussions that are tailored to improving the quality of instruction. So what if there were a set of thought-provoking questions that when discussed and answered could shepherd school systems from miniscule to model schools? Surely, every consummate educator would be resolved to unearth these guiding principles and thereby reflect upon and refine their professional practices in order to achieve improvements in learning. Examine the following:

- What specifically do we expect all students to learn?
- How will we know when each student has learned it?
- How will we respond when students are having difficulty learning?
- How will we respond when students demonstrate that they have learned? (Buffum, Mattos, & Weber, 2009).

As educators engage in discussions around and find the answers to these key questions the pillars of academic achievement, improved positive school culture, and improved teacher and leader effectiveness will

begin to develop and flourish, and school transformation will ensue. DuFour (2004) explains that these questions are vital, since they help staff to build shared knowledge and find common ground, which results in a solid foundation for planning school improvement initiatives.

Entrenched beliefs that students' success relies on a spectrum of socioeconomic factors to include race, poverty, and ethnicity must be silenced and substituted with an unwavering, shared commitment that all children can learn.

Establishing and maintaining a school-wide focus on learning requires more than having new discourse. It requires, also, having different discussions, eliminating those which, although they maintain an "educational flavor," hold a paucity of educational substance, with meager potential to significantly impact student gains. The tenor of the circulating voices needs to reflect a solvent ring that addresses learning. Entrenched beliefs that students' success relies on a spectrum of socioeconomic factors to include race, poverty, and ethnicity must be silenced and substituted with an unwavering, shared commitment that all children can learn.

Educators within their PLCs must tenaciously clasp their thoughts and subsequent actions around the premise that they possess the answers to the critical questions surrounding student learning. Recognizing the potent roles borne by those entrusted with educating children, Buffum, Mattos, and Weber (2009) declare that it is "educational malpractice" for educators to cling to outdated and ineffective instructional modalities while disregarding salient, research-driven best practices for reculturing schools.

As reflective practitioners, educators are required to timely and interdependently, within their PLCs, monitor and analyze student performance data in order to frequently inform their professional practice, thereby identifying strengths and clandestine weaknesses that impact student achievement. By doing this, the cornerstone pillars of improved teacher and leader effectiveness as well as that of improved positive school culture are concurrently strengthened and desired student outcomes are realized.

When administrators and staff utilize professional learning communities to engage in collective inquiry around the four critical questions to which every educator should know the answers, the spotlight of education will be focused on learning and the cornerstone pillars will securely bind the foundation upon which academic excellence is iteratively built.

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