

leadership is a beach

Cascading waves of mandates can make school leaders long for a tranquil shore to escape to. Here's how to work with, rather than against, the waves of change.

Gold swells radiated from the sun descending on the horizon as I sat on the sand in Laguna Beach. Just beyond the waves, a lone kayaker paddled steadily north. As often happens at those rare moments when our minds are at peace, I was struck with a bolt of clarity about a completely unrelated situation.

I had spent the previous day with a group of principals and school leadership teams, and had heard the often-repeated lament, "If only we could just focus on one thing at a time!" I listened to the familiar litany of: "If only they would just stop and realize that we're all in SB 472 training for language arts, we're changing the district benchmark tests, we're being required to hold data meetings twice a month, the principals are collecting classroom walk-through data on their PDAs, and we've had to change our entire daily schedule to get enough minutes for the kids in the intensive reading program! Why can't they just let us stay with one new thing at a time, and let us get good at that?"

Never having a satisfactory answer, I am often tempted to ask who "they" might be. If "they" are the administrators at the district office, I want to say that "they" are undoubtedly doing their best to respond in a coherent way to the dictates of higher governmental authority. Further, given today's political climate, the probability of our state and federal legislators losing interest

in passing cascading waves of mandates for public education is highly unlikely in any foreseeable future.

I have actually delivered this speech a few times, always with dubious impact. I am consistently greeted with the same degree of enthusiasm that my tax man gets when he reads me the total at the bottom of my return.

As the memory of the pained expressions and exasperated faces of those educators overlaid the sunset, I realized that my mode of response has been poor, to say the least. The human brain savors metaphors. The meta-analysis of research on classroom instruction conducted by McREL (described in "Classroom Instruction That Works") found that the identification of similarities and differences, including metaphors, had a significant impact on student achievement.

A metaphor for educators' reality

Ocean waves are the perfect metaphor for the current reality of public educators. No, we will not just get one wave, with a still, waveless shoreline lying tranquilly at our feet long before and after. We're in the ocean, not a pond. If we're going to survive and thrive, we had better get used to the waves.

Metaphors tend to break down when stretched too far, but the kayaker presented an interesting dimension. If the school leader positions herself, mentally and emotionally, just beyond the waves, she can provide guidance to her staff for navigating — and perhaps even enjoying — them. Sea kayakers

say that it is critical to learn to work with, not against, the energy of the waves. They understand wave sets. If the school leader understands the wave sets, she can help her teachers work with — not against — them.

In the example I heard, the "wave set" is being created largely by our state's Program Improvement initiative for schools and districts that have not met Adequate Yearly Progress for No Child Left Behind. An efficacious leader does not blame the wave set or the variables that created it. Instead, she helps the teachers understand how all the waves are related, including the research base that underpins the initiative.

In this case, the approved English language arts adoptions in California are designed to address the content standards comprehensively, as well as the diverse needs of students at any given grade level. However, simply allowing the adoption wave to wash over us will not necessarily benefit students. The comprehensive nature of the materials makes them extremely complex for an individual teacher to figure out and use effectively on his own. Carefully designed teacher training is essential for consistent implementation, so here comes the training wave: Senate Bill 472.

Waves of changes in classroom and school schedules have been generated because the programs were written to precisely fill a specified number of instructional minutes — those that are listed, by grade level, in the California Mathematics and English Language Arts Frameworks.

By Terry Wilhelm

Meanwhile, many districts have realized that their local benchmarks (if they have them at all) are not in alignment with the adopted materials, thus the wave of new assessments. For some teachers, the idea of coming together on a regular basis, even once or twice a month, to discuss assessments and common student work and plan instruction is still foreign. This may be a wave some are still resisting.

The standards-based adoptions have their own assessments built in. But highly effective team discussions, which can directly and immediately impact the instruction of students, may be focused on something as simple as a four-item section of a homework or class assignment, and can be conducted on a far more frequent basis.

Teachers who are successfully riding the collaboration wave find that when collaboration grows in sophistication, the workload is reduced due to group planning. The sharing of successes and challenges eases what can be the overpowering sense of aloneness that is characteristic of our classrooms.

Principals are being asked to step up and monitor the fidelity of classroom implementation of these programs, and are, like teachers, being required to attend state-approved training to build their skills in this area. A wave of tools like ACSA's Walk'bout program for PDAs increases the ability of the site administrator to do just that.

The principal can create a beach. The positive impact of a principal who rallies the staff continuously around successes, great and small, as proof of their collective ability to reach and teach all students, is inestimable.

It can be tempting to commiserate with staff members when they feel overwhelmed, and fall into the trap of agreeing that so many waves shouldn't be breaking at once. This does not do the teachers a favor. Instead, it can undermine their sense of group efficacy, and their faith in the leader to lead difficult change. It is our own ability to operate from a mental/emotional place beyond the waves that enables us to be cheerleaders, even at times when our own sense of cheer may be a little low. What can a school leader do to optimize the daily reality of the staff and students?

In a session for leadership teams, I heard one principal say to her team, "I know this is still hard for a lot of people, but since we've come back from training, I've seen more kids getting the routine during UA (Universal Access), and it's working. Next time we have an extra sub, I'd like to have as many people as possible go visit the sixth-grade team. Their ELs are really starting to move." Universal Access is a wave of change that came with the new adoptions. It enables students of varying needs to learn the core standards, but is a challenge for teachers who are not used to planning and managing small-group instruction in a regular classroom.

The opening of teachers' classroom practice to the eyes of others, both in collaborative meetings where student work samples and scores are shared, and in visitations like this principal was proposing, have fostered greater connections between teachers. This emotional by-product is more difficult to quantify than student performance scores, but can be measured and compared over time with some success using tools like the Cultural Shifts surveys in "Learning by Doing" by Richard DuFour, *et al.*

Maintaining equilibrium

The waves are going to continue to break, one after the other. Only the leader can, through intentional leadership actions, create a beach for the staff and students.

The kayaker I watched was clearly skilled at balancing his craft. I've often thought of the principalship as a balancing act, of maintaining an equilibrium of support and accountability. In the absence of either, little forward progress can be made. One principal I work with uses her PDA walk-through data to give frequent, positive group feedback to departmental and course-alike teams in several focus areas: increased use of research-based instructional strategies (such as the use of graphic organizers), levels of student engagement, and consistency of program pacing among classrooms.

She is highly visible in classrooms, and has many opportunities to notice where resources are needed, such as teacher or student materials, equipment or repairs, staff development and coaching support. Her verbal feedback at faculty and team meet-

ings and in her weekly e-mailed staff bulletin provide much-needed pats on the back to hard-working teachers, and allow the staff as a whole to be aware of progress in these important areas.

She also holds private conversations with teachers about what is seen – or not seen – in individual classrooms. For many site leaders, holding difficult conversations is not the most appealing aspect of the principalship. Personal discomfort, a mistaken notion of "high morale" or an unwillingness to rock the kayak cause some principals to simply avoid them, which is a grave mistake.

Few things are more demoralizing to conscientious teachers than colleagues who are not held accountable to the purported areas of current focus, and for professional behavior in general. School-wide forward momentum for students is stalled or halted. Blanket messages of "good job" to everyone won't cut it for really top-notch teachers.

I am energized and inspired whenever I observe a skilled principal navigate the daily life of the school. There is a seemingly effortless balancing of understanding and meeting the support and accountability needs of both the individual and the group, from one situation to another. The sea kayaker has nothing on these leaders.

Waves can be overwhelming. Leadership makes the difference in how improvement initiatives are experienced. They can be exciting and energizing, or futile and discouraging, but despite what we might wish, the waves are not going to stop. For that, you need to find a nice pond. ■

Resources

- DuFour, Richard and DuFour, Rebecca *et al.* (2006). *Learning by Doing: A Handbook for Professional Learning Communities at Work*. Bloomington, IN: Solution Tree.
- Marzano, Robert J., Pickering, Debra J. and Pollock, Jane E. (2001). *Classroom Instruction That Works*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.

Terry Wilhelm is director, Division of Educational Leadership Services, Riverside County Office of Education.