



Just for the ASKing!

by Bruce Oliver

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Just for the ASKing! is a monthly column that addresses the needs of instructional leaders, particularly building level administrators. Each month, this column provides information, insights, and suggestions that support administrators as they strive to be instructional leaders in schools. This month's focus is on what needs to be done to sustain progress and initiatives.

Sustainability: How Schools Keep Their Focus



Bruce facilitating the Leading the Learning workshop.

In this age of accountability, there can be no more satisfying accomplishment than receiving the news that your school has achieved its AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) target. It is often a time of excitement as faculties gather to celebrate their recognition and achievement. As a follow-up, banners often decorate school entrances and the good news is proudly displayed on school message boards and websites. In short, life is good. Faculties begin the next school year with feelings of optimism and enthusiasm as they greet their newest students. But for some schools, after the standardized tests are administered at the end of the next year, the results fall short. That wonderful sense of attainment suddenly regresses into feelings of frustration, and in extreme cases, despair. As school personnel grapple with the latest results, they try to determine what went wrong and what they must do to rebound from the disappointing news.

In other schools, however, the achievement continues to move in an upward trend. The overriding question then becomes, ***“Why are some schools able to continue making academic progress while others struggle to maintain their achievement level or even regress by falling short of their previous accomplishments?”*** There is no one answer that fits all situations. But there are stories from the field from practitioners that can help us better understand this frustrating and undesirable phenomenon. As I attempt to answer the question I have posed above, I will share insights from fellow educators that may provide a better understanding of what schools do to maintain or even exceed their previous achievement results while other schools may fall short.

The Problems

We Made It!

It is perfectly appropriate to be proud of the school's accomplishment, but too much pride can hamper progress. When teachers or administrators rest on their laurels because they feel they have found the answer to reaching achievement goals, it can have detrimental effects. New students are enrolling, the students who

are being tested are changing, and new research is emerging on a regular basis. The most discerning educators are lifelong learners who continue to keep open minds about the best ideas that will advance student learning.

Changes in Leadership

An old adage in the field of education is that the new leader of a school should not make any big changes for the first six months of her principalship. Instead the leader should spend time observing, listening, getting to know the staff, and gathering data. However, in today's hectic NCLB environment, some leaders feel the need to act swiftly to make their mark. With little time spent analyzing the current status or culture of the school, they begin making changes swiftly; it's out with the old and in with the new. Often these decisions are ego-driven or political in nature as the new leader charts her course and establishes a new vision. Frequently these new directions are established with little or no collaboration with the out-going leader. These abrupt actions can have a disadvantageous impact on student learning. There may be solid, research-based initiatives being implemented by the teaching staff that need more time to have a full impact on achievement results. The adverse effects of changes in leadership styles or approaches on the school environment can result in setbacks as teachers become frustrated and disenchanted, while students are confused by unexpected new initiatives to which they must adjust.

Lack of True Collaboration

In some environments, teacher collaboration may exist in name only. There is a loose structure and the general idea of collaboration has been promoted, but the details of how true collaboration should occur are vague. Teams of teachers are left to their own devices to determine how meetings will be structured (or unstructured as the case may be). Added to the problem is that the work of the teams is not monitored by or discussed with school administrators. Often the leaders are truly unaware of what goes on when teachers get together. Achievement may improve but it may be by accident rather than by design. "Collaboration lite," as Rick DuFour has deemed it, will not lead to continual growth in student learning.

Ignoring Data

In some schools, it is the final test scores that matter most. Sub-categories may get a cursory review, but there is little or no effort to dig deeply into the achievement results to determine in greater specificity what skills or knowledge students had mastered as well as problem areas that will require additional attention in the future. Some schools may also use the data to make excuses about "those kids" instead of determining more extensively which teaching methods resulted in higher levels of achievement. When selective data are ignored, old, ineffective instructional practices will have a greater likelihood of continuing. Another behavior that can impact progress of schools is the misuse of formative assessment data throughout the school year. If teachers are simply assessing learning, recording grades and moving on, it is a practice that is not only outdated but counterproductive. Teachers must analyze data as a regular part of their practice and use the information to determine who and/or what needs more attention.

Lack of Support and Recognition

Teaching is an exhausting profession. On a daily basis, teachers are faced with hundreds of decisions and seemingly insurmountable problems. As 2014 looms in our future, faculties are feeling more and more pressure to keep improving. The momentary celebration that accompanied the achievement of the school's goal is soon past history. The work continues with some teachers asking themselves, "Does anybody really understand how hard I am working?" When leaders fail to provide on-going support and recognition for their staffs, the teachers begin feeling that they are little more than a cog in a machine that will enable the school to look good and the leader to be looked upon favorably in the eyes of his or her superior.

The Solutions

Attention to Detail

In schools where student achievement continues to improve on a regular basis, the leaders, as well as the instructional staff, are not content to maintain the status quo. Although they acknowledge and celebrate their success (which is a vital and necessary part of a strong school culture), they realize that they must continue to make data-driven decisions every day. They do not think of “classroom data” but address the needs of individual students in order to ensure that each one is making progress. Gone are the days when a teacher simply says, “My class did really well on their last test.” Instead the focus is on the achievement and learning of each individual, and the teacher takes the necessary steps to ensure that every student is learning.

We’re All in This Together!

Improved student achievement should not be seen exclusively as the responsibility of the classroom teacher. Every person in the school must play a role in making sure that all students are progressing. If student learning is the goal, it remains the focus of department meetings, counseling sessions, faculty meetings, parent conferences, RtI (Response to Intervention) sessions, and teacher collaborative team meetings. When decisions are made, they should be done by asking the question, “How is what we’re proposing going to help students learn?” The belief system, where everyone’s role is seen as important and where there is a common goal, has been instrumental in maintaining academic progress in schools which have achieved or exceeded their targeted goals. Especially important is that the leaders are viewed as individuals who are willing to “roll up their sleeves” and do whatever is necessary to maintain the upward trend rather than be someone who simply makes pronouncements or establishes future school wide goals.

Open Minds

When teachers get to know their students well, they are able to determine what works and what doesn’t work to help those students learn. These astute observations on the parts of teachers can often be translated into generalizations that can enhance learning for other students in other classes. It is therefore paramount that all teachers keep open minds and are encouraged to share their findings with their peers. It can be so exciting when a teacher is heard saying, “I never thought about trying that with my kids” or “What a great approach. Thanks for sharing!” with a peer. However, great teachers do not stop there; they also continue to seek ideas from current, up-to-date research. In school cultures where open-mindedness is “the way we do business around here,” it is the sharing of practical ideas coupled with research-based strategies that have led to sustained achievement year after year.

Change is Necessary

We all recognize that the world around us is constantly evolving and advancing, and yet in the education profession, change seems to come as a surprise and is often met with a certain amount of resistance, and sometimes, suspicion. Schools cannot remain static but, at the same time, they should not be expected to jump on the latest bandwagon that is being promoted simply because the ideas are receiving a lot of attention at conferences or in the current literature. Striking a fine balance is the wisest approach. When conditions and/or student achievement data results dictate that a change is required, they cannot be ignored and steps must be taken to introduce fresh thinking into the mix. In schools in which continual improvement is the norm, changes are carefully introduced and all stakeholders are involved in the discussions/decisions. Additionally, everyone is kept apprised of the progress of the initiative so that once it becomes part of the school’s way of doing business, it is much easier to accept and implement.

More is Not Necessarily Better

In the excitement of meeting the achievement goal, decision makers sometimes conclude that the best approach to continual progress is to add more ideas and practices to the already full plate of the teachers. As a result, the staff is required to read and discuss the latest book, attend more meetings, submit more paperwork, establish more goals, or take on new instructional initiatives that the literature purports to be the “answer” to increasing student achievement. The teachers, the front-line practitioners, are often heard to say, “Could you just let me teach?” Leaders with keen insights will keep their fingers on the pulse of the staff; they will recognize when the staff is exhausted, possibly overworked and showing signs of stress. These attentive and sensitive leaders recognize the hard work the teachers do, they show appreciation for the conscientious dedication of their staff and know when and how to “back off.”

Every school is unique with its own personality and culture. I know of no school that is not working hard to reach its established achievement goals. It is the culture of the school, the style of the leader, the collaborative practices of the staff, and the judicious decision-making process that are the variables that separate those schools that achieve or exceed their goals from the schools that do not continue to make progress. A careful analysis of how the school operates on a day-to-day basis may provide important insights that will enable schools to reach and maintain their targets and thus continue to celebrate the successes and advancements that the school has worked so hard to achieve.

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