

# Five Levers to Improve Learning

*How to Prioritize for  
Powerful Results  
in Your School*

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# Introduction: Schools, Leadership, and Change

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## **Vignette 1: A New School**

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Based on the premise that “smaller is better,” Willow Wood School District was awarded a significant grant to create a small high school, with funding provided for various structural changes that would be required. The grant application had described how the smaller environment would create a more connected, personalized learning experience for students.

In the initial months the district addressed complex logistical details and brought in architects to plan for changes to a wing of an existing high school. The district’s IT team began to plan for a new computer network. A planning committee was formed to discuss the mission and vision of the new school. It was decided that teachers would be trained in a comprehensive instructional methodology emphasizing authentic problem solving and workplace readiness. The district brought in a consultant to assist with marketing to appeal to students with an interest in 21st century manufacturing and international business. A school principal was selected. A name, Global Prosperity Academy, was chosen because it aligned with the adopted mission of providing an international education that would prepare students to thrive in a global economy.

Six months before the opening of the new school, staff members were hired from the existing high school, and they were empowered to make a number of decisions related to curriculum and school structure. The intent was to develop a curriculum whereby students could focus on one of three sets of courses emphasizing workplace-readiness skills, global awareness, or engineering. Each student would have a laptop. The staff chose to implement a block schedule, and rather than using a traditional report card, they decided to use a new standards-based report card. An online curriculum development tool was selected for teachers to develop and track their curricula.

By the start of the school year, the building was ready, and students were enrolled. Staff had attended two summer workshops to gain a better understanding of authentic problem-solving strategies and workplace-readiness skills. At a parent meeting a few days before school began, the new standards-based report card was distributed, along with a pamphlet explaining the philosophy of the school and its mission statement. The facility looked great, and the community was energized by the concept of a new, small school with a global focus and lots of computers.

On opening day, a crew from a local television station pulled in front of the school, and a reporter spoke with students and others about the opportunities offered by the Global Prosperity Academy. The story that aired that night featured a close-up of the school's gleaming new sign; a few interviews with excited parents, the principal, and hopeful students; a shot of the impressive computer lab; and a closing scene showing a group of students heading inside as the first bell rang. The prospects of the Global Prosperity Academy had stirred tremendous excitement.

Unfortunately, that excitement quickly waned. After a few months it was clear that student achievement was no better than it had been at the large high school—and attendance rates were actually worse. The curriculum was never fully developed around the identified mission and purpose, and factions formed between what students perceived to be the high-achieving engineering group and the low-achieving workplace-readiness group. Two years later, the school was moved to a new site and completely reorganized. The enthusiasm of the early days gave way to finger-pointing, blame, and frustration.

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### **Vignette 2: A New Kitchen**

If you've ever undertaken a kitchen remodeling project, you understand the complexity of the process. It typically begins with an expressed need or concern: not enough room for the family, too few cabinets, outdated décor; or perhaps it's just time for a change. For the next several months, a conversation unfolds about what to do. You look at catalogs and web pages and bring in contractors to share their perspectives. As you gather quotes, sticker shock starts the process all over again. You discuss the long-term impact of the decision on finances and do some form of cost-benefit analysis on the back of an envelope or, perhaps, in a meticulously designed Excel spreadsheet. You consult the bank and hire a contractor, and finally the work begins.

For the next several months, your life is total chaos. Fast-food containers pile up in the trash, and dishes in the bathroom sink become the new normal. The contractor realizes that a product is on back order, and the electrician, who was supposed to come a few weeks ago, is out on another emergency call.

Just as you are about to give up hope, progress is made, and you see the new kitchen actually starting to take shape. Walls are painted; the sink works. You move your dishes into the new cabinets, turn on the new stove, and are excited at the prospect of actually using your new kitchen. You write the final check for the contractor and revel in the fact that the remodeling job is complete.

You are thrilled with the result. There's more room, it's more comfortable, and the space looks great.

That evening, you prepare your first meal in the remodeled space. You grab your grandmother's pot roast recipe from a folder on the new shelf. You've made the recipe dozens of times and are anxious to prepare it in the new kitchen. You pull several shiny new pans out of the impressive cabinets, fill a measuring cup with water from the new sink, take vegetables and a roast out of your new stainless steel refrigerator, steam the vegetables on the new stove, and place the roast in your new oven. The table is set. The digital timer announces that the roast is finished, so you take it out of the oven and set it on a hot pad on the impressive granite countertop. You are ready to eat. You sit down at the table and serve yourself. You take the first bite of the roast, close your eyes, and begin to chew.

You open your eyes. A feeling of disappointment washes over you as you realize that the food tastes exactly the same as it did when you prepared it in the old kitchen. It's good, but not great. It's your grandmother's recipe, but it's still not your grandmother's pot roast. Your 7-year-old complains that he doesn't like it. The 10-year-old asks why you didn't make it like Grandma does. Although the kitchen looks very different than it did before, the time, the effort, and the resources invested in the remodeling process didn't translate into better results.

"This tastes the way it did in the old kitchen," you sigh.

"Why would remodeling the kitchen make the food taste better?" asks your 10-year-old.

When we read these anecdotes, we're disappointed that the shift to a smaller school didn't have the intended results. The district invested time, effort, and resources in improving a school, and the initiative was unsuccessful. However, when we read about the kitchen remodel, we're surprised that anyone would expect the food to taste any better. Why is it that when a school is restructured we expect an increase in student learning, yet when we remodel a kitchen we understand that the quality of the food won't necessarily improve?

This book provides a framework for thinking about school improvement in a way that aligns effort and results for a successful outcome. But before we outline the basic components of the framework, let's consider the broader context surrounding current reform efforts.

## **Standing at the Crossroads**

Barely two generations ago, the United States led the world in educational attainment. By the end of the civil rights movement, children had access to near-universal public education through high school. Meanwhile, most other developed countries were positioned to educate only a portion of their children and youth. American achievement was the envy of the world.

Two generations ago, the design of public education in the United States was generally well aligned with the economic needs of the nation. A minority of students were educated at high levels, and a majority were well prepared to enter an adult work environment that was highly structured, that suited workers who could tolerate repetitive tasks and needed close

supervision and direction, and that accommodated those who were not prepared to solve complex problems. People who were educated at higher levels generally were responsible for supervising and managing the rest.

Two generations ago students could leave formal education knowing most of what they would need to succeed as adults. Even students who left the school system before high school graduation could find work that paid well enough to raise a family and enjoy a middle-class life. As Harvard professor Roland Barth has stated,

Fifty years ago high school graduates left school knowing 75% of what they would ever need to know in order to function successfully in the workplace, in their families and communities. Today, the estimate is that our high school graduates leave knowing only 2% of what they need to know, leaving 98% yet to come. It is not that high school graduates know less than their counterparts back in the 1950's; in fact, they know far more. But today, a basic kit of knowledge just does not cut it anymore. (1997, p. 56)

Two generations ago, most Americans viewed education as a key investment in building a better future for the nation and its communities. Taxpayers were generally willing to invest in infrastructure and operational costs to ensure that schools were able to accomplish the mission they had been given. Schools as institutions, although criticized, were generally seen as providing a path to a better future than the life enjoyed by the previous generation.

The world has changed—dramatically. Most experts agree that the U.S. education system has not improved significantly over the past decade or more (Ravitch, 2010). Test scores are generally flat, and many view the federal and state policies designed to move the system forward as having fallen far short and maybe even being a distraction from a focus that might have produced better results.

Meanwhile, other developed countries have invested strategically in their educational systems, are seeing significant progress, and are growing their capacity to do even better. The U.S. system that not long ago was the envy of the world has slipped on international rankings in academic subject areas to at or below the international average (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development [OECD], 2010). Other countries now are

educating an ever larger portion of their youth, whereas the stubbornly high dropout rate in the United States increasingly leaves us educating a comparatively smaller cohort of its youth (Tucker, 2011). Even the performance of our best students no longer stacks up well against the best in other countries. For example, the portion of students in the United States performing at the highest levels on international exams is smaller than in some developing countries, including Mexico (OECD, 2010). It is not so much that U.S. education has fallen back as it is that other countries are improving at a faster rate and achieving better results with their work. The current U.S. system is inefficient in that we are spending hundreds of millions of dollars to remediate students who fail to learn.

Each year special education classes are filled with tens of thousands of students who perhaps would not have to be there if they had been taught, from the start of their schooling, in the ways that they learn best. Ironically, when students finally find themselves identified and placed in such classes, the focus becomes doing that very thing—teaching them in the ways they learn best.

As noted, our national dropout rate has remained stubbornly high. Yet students who decide to leave high school before graduation overwhelmingly report that their reasons for leaving were not that the work was too hard but, rather, that they found the work to be boring and not relevant or useful to the lives they envision. Meanwhile, of students who graduate from high school and choose to enroll in two-year colleges, 75 percent must enroll in remedial courses in math or English or both (National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education, 2010).

The well-paying but relatively low-skill jobs of the past—for which a large portion of students were prepared and which once supported the middle class—are gone. The jobs have been either absorbed by technology or shipped to places where labor is less expensive and less organized. No longer can a student leave formal education at the end of high school (or before) and expect to gain and hold a job that will support a middle-class lifestyle.

The public's willingness to pay for today's educational system also is waning. The cost of education in the United States is among the highest in the developed world. Yet the results are at best average, and, as noted,



they appear to be slipping as other countries invest in and improve their systems. Taxpayers increasingly ask whether they are getting a reasonable return on their investment. Line items for education in the federal and state budgets are seen as expenditures to be minimized and contained rather than as an investment that will yield a high return. As the U.S. population ages and fewer taxpayers have children in schools, this challenge will grow. We must find ways to increase the efficiency and productivity of our schools if we hope to maintain community support in terms of both goodwill and funding.

Meanwhile, educators are being held to higher levels of accountability than ever before. No Child Left Behind legislation created new levels of accountability for schools to address the needs of all students. Race to the Top grants move that accountability to each individual teacher, and new policies related to teacher evaluation place teachers under higher levels of scrutiny. At the same time, contrary to cynics' perceptions, teachers and administrators work extremely hard—both in and out of their schools—to address student needs.

In the middle of this expanding challenge, reformers at the federal, state, and even local levels too often become preoccupied with supposed “silver bullet” solutions that address aspects of the system yet hold little leverage and even less promise of making a real difference in student learning. These solutions often sound plausible and make intuitive sense. Unfortunately, such solutions frequently focus on the wrong levers and result in little if any improvement. Yet they can cost hundreds of millions of dollars, waste valuable time, defeat teachers, and demotivate students before losing favor and being abandoned.

Despite these seismic shifts, the U.S. educational system continues much as it did when students' prospects after high school were much better and more predictable. As a result, we risk having the current system underprepare large segments of the student population, creating a permanent underclass without the skills necessary to succeed in today's workplace while hundreds of thousands of excellent-paying jobs that require higher skills go unfilled, even in recessionary times (McKinsey & Company, 2009). Today's schools and districts must consider different ways to leverage their capacity to educate all students at high levels.