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Introduction

It is quite a remarkable feat to turn around a failing school, and it is an even more improbable one to continue to sustain and improve student achievement year after year. However, there are schools that are sustaining student achievement in spite of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) or the policy pressure of the hour. How is it then that some schools, regardless of political pressures, sustain student achievement and seem to get better each year? What seems to be the magic formula for these schools? I do believe that the desire to sustain student achievement lives in the heart of every educator. Yet, very few schools are successful and do in fact sustain student achievement.

These questions about sustaining student achievement arose from my own experience of leading the Disney Elementary school community out of a “failure mind-set” to an “achieving mind-set.” I recall fellow principals asking me in the midst of the intense work of reversing a failing student achievement pattern, “How can we keep this going?” Sustainability is a perplexing problem faced by every public school, let alone a school forced to improve. The work of sustaining achievement is in fact relentless for, at any time, the pattern of improved student achievement can be reversed. On every front, a sustaining school must continue to persevere through obstacles such as poverty and second-language issues, or it will become mediocre and allow student achievement to slide. It was not good enough for Disney teachers to relax in their pursuit of improving student achievement. These teachers had come too far to settle for becoming just a good school; they wanted to be a great school.

2 Sustaining Extraordinary Student Achievement

The goal of being a great school had always been in the hearts of the Disney Elementary staff. In 1997, Disney Elementary was recognized as a California Distinguished School. Just two years later, Disney became an underperforming school. The shock of the underperforming label propelled the Disney staff to embark on an improvement process initially forecasted to take three years to exit the “underperforming” status. The initial improvement process instead transformed Disney from underperforming to a sustaining school that continues to sustain achievement as of this writing. As principal, my role was to set the improvement process in motion to exit the state’s Immediate Intervention of Underperforming Schools Program (IIUSP). However, this short-term goal turned into a long-term one as the Disney community embraced the notion of being an excellent sustaining school. Even three years after I left my role as Disney principal, student achievement has continued to be sustained.

According to many, Disney broke the “mold” of the high-poverty under-achieving school. It became and is to this day one of the highest performing schools in Burbank. From the story of Disney Elementary and my own experience, I began to wonder if the variables that led to our success were the keys to sustaining student achievement at other schools. Are these variables that sustained Disney Elementary the same for other high-poverty, high-achieving elementary schools? These and other questions propelled me into my study of five extraordinary sustaining elementary schools in California. The object of the study was to tell the story of these five schools and identify their key elements that sustained their student achievement.

SELECTION OF FIVE TITLE 1 SCHOOLS

To study why certain schools sustained, I decided to look at high-achieving, Title 1 elementary schools in California similar to Disney Elementary. Additionally, these schools had to have sustained student achievement for a minimum five-year continuous period as demonstrated by the California Academic Performance Index (API), California Standards Test (CST), and federal Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) data. Selecting just Title 1 elementary schools further narrowed the focus of investigation. If these elementary schools could sustain student achievement in the face of poverty, second-language issues, and a number of other obstacles, the information brought forth could be of real benefit to the field of education.

To identify the top schools, I referenced the Title 1 Achieving Schools state list for specific schools that had sustained student achievement for at least five years. Schools were selected representing both northern and southern California that had sustained achievement so as to give a broad scope of sustaining schools, not just localized to southern California. Each school’s record of achievement was rigorously examined to meet the selection criteria.

Evaluating the Principal's Effectiveness

This past year, Sylvan staff members were asked to evaluate Antracoli by way of an anonymous survey to provide the principal with input on his performance. Typically when the staff identifies areas for change, Antracoli changes his behavior. Recently the staff survey gave him feedback on perceptions of his work behavior. "They were right that sometimes I acted like I was the only one who had anything to do and it was good to get that information." He changed his behavior. Allowing staff to give the principal feedback says to teachers that the principal is accountable as much as they are. Additionally, when the principal acts on staff feedback, it helps teachers to focus on the positive work of their students rather than to continue with complaints about the principal—complaints that will distract teachers from their most important work—instruction.

USING STUDENT DATA TO GUIDE CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

Pinpointing assessment data is fundamental to improving student achievement. In schools where students are not achieving, there is either limited understanding of the value of data or the inability to translate the meaning of the data into quality instruction. Schools that are not sustaining achievement often lack a coordinated system of data collection and analysis by the principal and the leadership team. The principal must purposefully direct the instructional program based on what the data show as targeted weaknesses in student achievement. Improving the instruction in these areas of weaknesses is critical to sustaining student achievement from year to year.

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Data provided through California's STAR testing system—California Standards Tests (CSTs) and California Achievement Tests, version 6 (CAT/6)—as well as curricular assessments are used to provide information for both curriculum and instruction at Sylvan. During the summer, the principal analyzes the CSTs and the CAT/6 administered to students during April and May. Antracoli looks first at the areas of weakness within the language arts and mathematics tests. "I can tell you right now that we have been weak on writing conventions, so that is an area we have continually targeted, and it has been a focus of our after-school programs this year. Our fourth- and fifth-grade math scores have not been as high as our second- and third-grade math scores. So one of the things I have done is made sure that my fourth- and fifth-grade teachers I have hired are strong in math."