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# Introduction

The idea of ensuring that all students meet and exceed rigorous learning standards as determined by mandated assessments is daunting for many educators. In fact, our most enduring educational challenge has now been made into a law: The No Child Left Behind Act has brought national attention to the need for change and accountability. We are now being asked to deliver on the very premise on which our educational system was founded, “education for all.” With strong, legislated accountability measures now in place, ensuring learning for all is no longer an option. It is now a mandate.

Educators are searching frantically for ways to meet this educational challenge. Even traditionally high-performing schools recognize the need to improve to ensure that all students demonstrate mastery of the intended curriculum. Obviously, most educators have always been concerned about those students who struggled to learn and did not succeed in school. Caring teachers and administrators have continually sought ways to reach and teach all children. This concern has translated into countless educational reform efforts in our schools. Yet there always seem to be those students who just don’t make it, who fall between the cracks.

Although we regretted their lack of success, up until about the late 1980s, students who were unsuccessful in school could usually still find gainful employment somewhere in the workforce. There were still plenty of manual labor jobs available. They could help out on the family farm or perhaps work in a factory doing manual labor

that required little more than a strong back and the ability to persevere in repetitive tasks. Now, with growing advancements in technology and changes in the world economy, unskilled jobs that pay well enough to keep an individual out of poverty have largely disappeared. Those unskilled jobs that have not been entirely replaced by machines have been squeezed by the competition of a global labor market until they no longer pay enough to provide even the most meager living. Indeed, most basic technology jobs once considered the “jobs of the future” are being shipped overseas. If students are to be successful in the workforce of tomorrow, they will require solid education credentials and the ability to think and process information at an increasingly demanding level. Today, we simply cannot afford for one student to fall between the cracks of our system.

Although NCLB has been around since 2001, no clear direction for education reform has emerged. “Educational reform” seems to imply that you can simply take the educational system currently in place, make some technical tweaks and adjustments, and fix it until it results in learning for all. However, the traditional educational system was never designed to deliver those results. For example, consider the inflexibility of the traditional school schedule: a fixed school calendar of about 180 days, school day of about 6½ hours, and class periods of about 50 minutes for everyone. How can a system designed around the inflexible use of time meet the learning needs of students who learn at different rates and enter school with such a variance of knowledge and ability?

### **School Improvement vs. School Transformation**

Educators who have been around awhile are extremely familiar with the term “school improvement.” However, there seem to be many different viewpoints when it comes to its meaning. For some educators, those words may conjure up painful images of more work, more time, and more meetings! For others, the idea is simply dismissed because the constant profusion of new and often conflict-

ing school improvement strategies has led to an attitude that “this too shall pass.” In fact, one often hears educators describe mandated school reform initiatives as “this year’s new thing,” as temporary and ephemeral as last year’s new thing and next year’s new thing. Then, of course, there are those who seem to view school improvement as something that is packaged neatly in the form of an elaborate program or kit, an add-on to the current system. Others view school improvement as a plan written by a special committee, presented and discussed with much fanfare, and then invariably laid to rest somewhere on a shelf. Perhaps worst of all, some educators view school improvement as simply working harder at what they are currently doing, even though what they are doing is not producing the results they are after.

It is no wonder that teachers and administrators often become skeptical when a new educational initiative begins. Noisy educational bandwagons have rolled past our schools decade after decade, many claiming to have the cure for all our woes. We have jumped on, and we have jumped off! In reality, we know that true school improvement does not come in a program or kit. It does not show up in the form of a product, and it certainly does not roll in on a bandwagon. Meeting the mandates of No Child Left Behind will actually require much more than *reforming* schools. It will actually require *transforming* schools to meet the learning needs of all students. School transformation is not a technical tweak or adjustment to the current system. Real transformation ultimately will change the way our schools look, function, and operate. Instead of an add-on or an attempt to fix the current system, school transformation will require redefining, redesigning, and aligning a system of education that will meet the learning needs of all students. School transformation is an ongoing process that takes educators on an incredible journey. The transformation process is not about programs and innovations. It is about people and ideas!

### **School Transformation Is Inclusive**

The school transformation process requires that we recognize the fact that it takes all stakeholders to transform a school. Past thinking seemed to be that if we improve instruction, we improve the school. Therefore, most school improvement efforts were directed toward the classroom teacher. Other adults in the building who did not have direct responsibility for the instruction of students were often left out of the improvement process.

School transformation requires a collaborative effort on behalf of all stakeholders in the school: staff, students, parents, and community. Everyone has to be involved in the process at some level because everyone to some extent contributes to the overall effectiveness of the school and its learning environment. In the school transformation process, all stakeholders must have a clear picture of an effective school in which all students meet or exceed learning expectations. Allowing people opportunities to meet together, to dream, and to share their greatest hopes and aspirations for the school is one way to make this happen.

### **Developing a Shared Vision**

Vision is more than just our ability to imagine a brighter future. The school transformation process begins with our ability to clearly articulate three important perspectives in time: *knowing where we want to be, recognizing where we currently are, and valuing where we have been.* The transformation journey takes us along a charted course that leads from the current reality toward a shared vision of what could be while honoring the work and accomplishments of the past.

The first step in the school transformation process is creating a shared vision throughout the organization of what a school looks like when no child is left behind. This is important because, as with any journey, you must begin with the final destination in mind. Teachers and administrators are so caught up in the current reality

of their day-to-day work that they seldom take the time to step back and ask, “Where do we eventually want to be?”

I learned a lesson about the importance of shared vision many years ago when I became principal of an inner-city school in Fayetteville, North Carolina. The school served students from four housing projects, and nearly all the students lived in poverty. This school had a long history of low academic performance. Each year, the average score on the California Achievement Test, the assessment used by the district to determine academic achievement, was usually around the 24th percentile—the kind of score you would expect when students are merely guessing at answers. Most of the teachers had been at this school for many years. Parent involvement was almost nonexistent. Nearly everyone in the school and in the greater community had come to accept low performance as par for the course. After all, we had every good excuse to fail.

The teachers and I heard about another school, with a student population very similar to ours, where students were not only doing well but were excelling. The reaction of my staff was, “We’ll believe that when we see it!” So, along with six staff members, I went to visit this school in Landover, Maryland. We spent the day visiting classrooms and talking with teachers, administrators, students, and parents. On the return trip home, we were excited and filled with anticipation because we had seen a picture, a vision of what could be at our school. As we symbolically threw our excuses out the van window that afternoon, we made a commitment to learning for all, whatever it might take.

### **Recognizing the Current Reality**

A picture of a bright future alone is not enough. It’s also important to take a clear-eyed look at your current reality. This second picture is also an important and necessary part of the school transformation process because it defines our starting point. Having a

clear idea of what actually is helps us to see where we are in relationship to what could be. The journey to school transformation is the course we chart between these two distinct places.

In order to do this, we must develop an accurate way to assess where we are in relationship to where we want to be. Therefore, we must have a way to accurately measure our current place if we want to transform our school into a powerful teaching and learning organization. For example, if our shared vision is that all third-grade students should read at or above grade level by the end of the school year, we have to begin by knowing how many of our third-grade students are actually reading at or above grade level now. The greater the distance between these two points, the more road we have to travel in the school transformation process.

### **Valuing the Past**

All too often, when an educational change occurs, the focus seems to be on those things that are not working and need to be changed instead of those things that are working or have worked in the past. With so much attention on what needs to be changed and the need to look forward, it is natural that educators sometimes forget to reflect on and honor past accomplishments that have helped improve the school. However, this is a very important part of the school transformation process.

Many of the current staff members may have been a part of the school for several years. There is a rich history of relationships, hard work, and effort on behalf of the people who have been a part of the school family in the past. It is critical that everyone understands that this past work has been significant and is valued; otherwise, people may feel as if their work was not seen as worthwhile. If we want to have everyone on board in the process, school transformation must not be viewed as an indictment of past practice. School transformation is an ongoing process that builds on past successes. Teachers



and administrators must be given the opportunity to discuss and share what they have done in the past and examine what seemed to work well. Honoring past effort on behalf of the existing school community gives those educators that have been a part of the organization permission to come aboard the school transformation process. Their knowledge, expertise, and experience are invaluable.

## **Developing a Shared Sense of Organizational Purpose**

Once we have developed a shared vision of what could be, coupled with a clear picture of our current reality, it is important for stakeholders to develop a shared sense of organizational purpose. Organizational purpose is the vehicle that drives the school transformation process, the shared purpose of learning for all. In order to establish purpose, many schools write a mission statement. However, simply writing a mission statement is not adequate to ensure a deep sense of purpose. Almost every organization, including the local Jiffy Lube, has a mission statement. The real question is whether or not the people in the organization possess a strong objective that truly directs their behavior. For example, Mothers Against Drunk Driving (MADD) is a powerful organization with a strong sense of organizational purpose. You don't have to read their mission statement to know what their purpose is; you simply watch the behavior of the members of the organization. Their behavior clearly communicates their purpose: to remove every drunk driver from the road. It also communicates the fact that they won't consider their work to be complete until they have accomplished the mission. I often ask educators, what if every adult in this school had that same drive and determination to make sure each and every student is learning? All students would indeed learn, because no one would stop striving until it was accomplished! That is what is meant by organizational purpose. It is the intense passion and desire that drive our behavior and affect our day-to-day decisions.