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Foundations of Change: District, School, and Teacher Goals

This chapter will

1. illustrate the necessity of identifying core values and how our district worked through that process
2. illustrate the importance of establishing organizational goals in order to achieve success with systemic change
3. provide answers and details about the development of school and teacher goals

The bonus in this chapter is that these concepts can apply to any new or ongoing initiative you may be working on in your district. Our focus will, of course, be on differentiation. At times, however, we will generalize to apply to any initiative.

Vision without action is merely dreaming.
Action without vision just passes time.
Vision with action can change the world.
—Joel Barker

Building a culture of differentiation in our district did not happen just because we said we wanted it to happen. In fact, successfully pushing through new initiatives of any kind does not just happen. To be successful, the change must be systemic—with the entire organization moving forward in the same direction.
Core Values: A Necessity

In the 1999–2000 school year, our district originally created a goal centering around differentiated instruction. As described in Chapter 1’s Inside Oakwood, we had what we thought was a pretty good plan: to start in the elementary schools and eventually move to the junior high and high school.

Unfortunately, after a couple of years, this goal fell by the wayside. It was still in print as a part of our district goals, but other initiatives took its place. As so many districts do, we were trying to do too many things at the same time. We were not making focused, systemic progress toward accomplishing any of our goals.

In 2005, our district had a transition of leadership—a new director of curriculum, instruction, and assessment, who had reignited the focus on differentiation, and a new superintendent, who knew the importance of establishing a set of core values tied directly to our vision and mission.

The concept of our district’s core values came as a result of a book study led by our new superintendent in 2005. Transforming Schools: Creating a Culture of Continuous Improvement, by Zmuda, Kuklis, and Kline (2004), was the focus of our study. The authors referred to two types of systems—incompetent and competent. The practices in an incompetent system stem from assumptions based on perceived reality, having little to no connection to that system’s core beliefs. On the other hand, competent systems use systemic thinking that is based on reality—the “brutal facts,” as Jim Collins (2001) would put it. To have a competent system, our practices needed to be based on reality and directly linked to our core beliefs.

The process of establishing our core values was so valuable to our district that it is shared here:

♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦ ♦

Inside Oakwood

In May 2005, the superintendent met with district administrators and the Board of Education to discuss our strengths, weaknesses, and the future. Her intention was to bring all of us together to work on a common purpose: identifying our core beliefs. We also discussed how to involve our stakeholders in this process. This experience turned out to be as much a bonding experience as a plan for the future.

Beginning in January 2006, our superintendent hosted 10 focus groups with the purpose of talking specifically about what our district’s core values
One thing became abundantly clear from this meeting: As the educational leader of Oakwood High School, I had a lot of work to do regarding getting our staff to truly understand, embrace, and seamlessly implement differentiation.

We intentionally left this vignette unresolved here because the point is to show that as leaders we need to be able to frame our conversations with the language of differentiation. We want to be able to articulate what differentiation is, why it’s critical, and what it looks like. We want to be able to offer strategies and resources to support teachers. We want to be able to explain to parents what we do and why we do it. And we want to be prepared and confident to respond to comments like these:

Teacher: “I’m already doing this differentiation stuff.”

We found two types of teachers in this category. The first type was the teachers who were actually doing differentiation in the classroom. We hoped to help these teachers continue to grow in the use of differentiation and also serve as teacher leaders among the staff. Many of these teachers themselves went on to be facilitators of professional learning communities (which are discussed later in this chapter). The second type included teachers who thought they were differentiating, but in reality were not. This brought on another challenge of helping these teachers understand the true meaning of differentiation.

Teacher: “Differentiation is just another fad. It, too, will pass. I don’t need to change. I just need to wait it out.”

Those of us who have been in education long enough know that some things—like open classrooms—come and go like fads. Other things—like formative assessment for learning—endure. It’s important to communicate that differentiation falls in the latter category: it’s a sound instructional approach that we will not abandon.

In Oakwood we had several of those reluctant teachers that Phillip Schlechty writes about in his article “On the Frontier of School Reform with Trailblazers, Pioneers, and Settlers” (1993). Characterizing them as “settlers” and “stay-at-homes,” he writes, “Settlers need to know what it is they are expected to do and where they are going to go. They need much more detail and more carefully drawn maps than do those who have gone before them. They need to be persuaded that the venture upon which they are being asked to embark is worthwhile.” We felt that, as an administrative team, we would be much more able to provide those details and maps if we could articulate what differentiation looked like in a variety of classrooms. We also learned
that stay-at-homes refuse to budge and need to be treated with “benign neglect.”

Teacher: “If I try tiered assessments, that’s going to change how I grade. Am I going to be supported by the principal if a parent questions my new assessment practices?”

We realized that we need to provide freedom to teachers to use different strategies in the classroom, and we need teachers to know that we will defend and support them as they try new strategies and assessment practices. As we administrators learned more about differentiation, we were able to communicate permission to the teachers to take risks with differentiation and experiment to see what works best. We sometimes found teachers reluctant to change their expectations for their students, fearing they would be accused of lowering their expectations. A teacher can still have high expectations for a student, but they might not be the same as the expectations for a student sitting across the room.

Parent: “My child isn’t being challenged enough.” Or “Why does my child have a different spelling list (or more challenging reading assignment) than other kids?”

Our knowledge gave us the foundation upon which to respond to parents’ concerns. We try to communicate to parents that we strive as educators to challenge every child; students may have different work (replacement work), but they shouldn’t have more of the same work. We now share a common definition of differentiation and vocabulary to explain what is happening in the classroom. Some forms of differentiation are not obvious to students, let alone to parents. We can explain that parents might not always realize how the teacher is differentiating for a child and that it’s a fair question to ask a teacher. Our teachers, similarly, have grown very adept (far more adept than we) at providing examples of the differentiation that they do in their classroom.

In order to be prepared to lead and support differentiation and to address situations like the aforementioned, we need to be sufficiently knowledgeable about differentiation. The next section of this chapter describes how we, as an administrative team, participate in a professional learning community to increase our own knowledge of differentiation and support each other. We strongly recommend that any school or district leaders who are undertaking the role of change agent for differentiation grow their knowledge of differentiation as part of a group of like-minded educators. Going it alone is difficult and isolating. Learning with peers who are similarly engaged in the journey of enculturating differentiation provides crucial emotional and intellectual
Beckoning: “Light” Strategies

This chapter will

1. introduce Carol Ann Tomlinson’s metaphor of fire and light for cultivating differentiation in every classroom
2. identify strategies to draw teachers toward change, including teacher leadership, modeling, professional development, and celebration

“Differentiation is not an invitation; it is an expectation.”
—Oakwood City School District CORE Team

“My knee-jerk reaction [to being required to differentiate instruction] was, ‘You can’t make me.’ It was your standard, middle-aged, white guy rant . . . The PLCs were a good strategy for me. I shut my big mouth and learned from colleagues, people I respect. They’ve given me a broad range of perspectives.”
—Rob Guizzo, 35-year veteran Oakwood High School science teacher

Fire and Light Metaphor

This chapter introduces the reader to a “fire and light” metaphor used by Carol Ann Tomlinson to emphasize the need to both draw and push educators toward differentiation. This chapter also goes into detail about “light”
strategies that can be used by leaders to effect change for differentiation. Chapter 5 will focus on “fire” strategies that push teachers toward change for differentiation.

In 2007, Carol Ann Tomlinson presented a session titled “Differentiation and Change: Fiddlers on the Schoolhouse Roof” at the annual ASCD conference. During the presentation, she introduced the metaphor of fire and light as paramount to a school’s or district’s efforts to cultivate differentiation in every classroom.

Light symbolizes efforts to beckon and draw teachers toward change. Light represents warmth, companionship, comfort, and security. Comfort and security are not often associated with change efforts, but light strategies can provide them. Such strategies, which will be discussed in the following sections, include teacher leadership, modeling, professional development, and celebration.

Light strategies have the greatest impact, and most of a school’s or district’s efforts should be invested in beckoning and drawing educators toward change. Not all teachers, however, respond to being beckoned by the light. Fire strategies are therefore necessary to communicate that all teachers are expected to differentiate and that this expectation is nonnegotiable.

Fire symbolizes the necessity of making it uncomfortable—or impossible—for teachers to maintain the status quo. Fire makes us uncomfortably hot and forces us to move away from where we are. This is critical because, as the Oakwood mantra says, differentiation is not an invitation; it is an expectation. Fire strategies include differentiated supervision, aligning teacher evaluation to differentiation, and providing “required choice” professional development. These strategies are discussed in the next chapter.

Neither cajoling nor forcing people to change is particularly effective (Reeves, 2009). Change is a messy, complicated, and often confounding process. We believe, however, that when both light and fire strategies are infused into a school’s or district’s change initiative, change is more likely not only to occur but to become part of a school’s or district’s culture.

While there are perhaps innumerable light strategies, the four that we believe are most effective are teacher leadership, modeling, professional development, and celebration.

**Teacher Leadership**

We have learned that teachers are more likely to follow the lead of fellow teachers whom they respect than they are to follow administrators or outside experts. One of the best examples of teacher leadership within our district