

Leadership Actions for Transforming Schools

Welcome to our inaugural issue of *SEDL Insights*. This issue reviews actions that school leaders can take to more effectively guide the school transformation process.

Effective leadership is a crucial part of school improvement.¹ Yet leaders at schools in the process of transformation often struggle with how to best guide their staff and students to better outcomes. Our experiences serving as turnaround principals in Texas and South Carolina and then working with underperforming schools while at SEDL have revealed insights on the core actions that leaders take in successfully leading school transformations. These actions can create the conditions needed to shape a school culture where teaching and learning can improve. Although these insights are written for people who often lead school turnaround efforts—principals, assistant principals, instructional coaches, and teacher leaders—other stakeholders involved in school improvement may also find them instructive.

SEDL Insights on Effective Leadership Actions for Transforming Schools

1. Establish and pursue a vision of your preferred future.
2. Increase organizational coherence.
3. Provide clear communication.
4. Monitor and review progress.
5. Provide resources and support.
6. Increase leaders' presence throughout schools and in the community.

Insight

1

Establish and pursue a vision of your preferred future.

Most educators know of schools in turnaround settings that set ambitious goals for improved student outcomes, only to be disappointed with continued low student achievement in the following years. Often missing from this goal-setting exercise is the development of a strategic vision for improved teaching and learning. School leaders will benefit from reflecting on their vision, specifically the practices staff will adopt to reach their school turnaround goals. Leaders and staff who are building a vision might ask themselves: As we go through the school improvement process, what will our students be doing? What will our teachers and other staff be doing differently? What will I as the leader of this school be doing to bring about effective reform? Equally important is inviting other stakeholders to engage in the conversation and help determine how to achieve the ideal vision for their school.

As the principal of a turnaround school, Sylvia Pirtle asked staff to report to work 2 weeks early at the beginning of the school year to create a preferred vision for their school and develop protocols for

¹ Cowan, D., Joyner, S., & Beckwith, S. 2012.

how staff would work and communicate with each other. In small groups, the staff discussed their values and beliefs about their perceptions of what students and teachers would be doing in an ideal learning environment. After each small group shared its reflections with the entire group, staff used the feedback to create a vision of the ideal school. Creating a vision and describing what administrators, teachers, and students would do to achieve the vision provided a framework for the school's improvement efforts. To further describe and support this process, staff created and signed a school compact designating how they would work as professionals to improve teaching and learning.



Research supports the importance of bringing staff and stakeholders together to diagnose the barriers to student success.² To that end, SEDL encourages school leaders to analyze multiple sources of data, such as curriculum, assessments, instruction, and student-teacher relations. Doing so helps reveal the gaps and barriers that often result in poor implementation of initiatives, which can lead to little or no impact on student learning.³ For example, teachers at Pirtle's school attended professional development sessions on using guided reading groups to increase students' literacy skills. When school leaders and coaches

² Bottoms, G., & Schmidt-Davis, J., 2010; Cowan et al., 2012.

³ Cowan et al., 2012.

⁴ Cowan et al., 2012; Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Easton, J. Q., & Luppescu, S., 2010.

⁵ Cowan et al., 2012.

⁶ Bryk et al., 2010.

⁷ Cowan et al., 2012.

examined implementation data, however, they realized that some classrooms had made little progress in providing guided reading groups to support struggling readers. Using formative data, the principal and coaches developed plans to target teachers for coaching and modeling sessions on guided reading groups and to provide interventions for students. They also applied monitoring systems to ensure that students received appropriate instruction as originally intended. Having leaders and staff identify proven practices, strategies, tools, and resources that help students succeed is also fundamental to school improvement.⁴ For example, leaders must create conditions that encourage teachers to frequently meet in professional learning groups so they can reflect on their instructional practices, review and analyze student work, unpack standards, and plan and adjust instruction to meet student needs.

Finally, the leadership team should continuously review what supports and hinders student achievement and identify the areas of greatest need. The team can then use this information to develop a plan that focuses on a few high-leverage priorities and also establishes short- and long-term goals.⁵ Assigning staff the tasks and actions needed to fulfill the vision and goals is also essential.⁶ Having evidence that students' overall academic achievement was linked to improved reading skills, the leadership team at Pirtle's school made literacy a school improvement focus. The school staff then defined roles and responsibilities for accomplishing their created vision and developed plans and schedules to ensure that instructional time was sustained and uninterrupted.

Insight 2 Increase organizational coherence.

Increasing a school's ability to act as a unified whole to increase its coherence, instead of addressing school improvement in a fragmented manner, fosters a shared purpose and commitment to improving outcomes for all students.⁷ This component

involves ensuring that curriculum, instruction, and assessments are aligned to state standards; strengthening the capacity of leaders and school staff to analyze and use data for decision making; ensuring continued professional learning for all staff; aligning staffing and resources with instructional priorities; and providing structures and processes that promote staff collaboration and collegiality.⁸

During Don Doggett's tenure as a turnaround principal, his school used curriculum mapping to increase instructional coherence. When completing curriculum maps, teachers reviewed the entire curriculum and created a calendar-based plan outlining when they would teach the various standards.⁹ All grade-level teachers at this elementary school had a chance to review the plan and suggest changes. The teachers then taught the curriculum at the suggested pace. Doggett asked teachers to submit lesson plans at least 4 days before they taught a lesson, enabling him to adjust the lessons to align with the intended standards. Teachers also completed diary maps during the school year to record the lessons they taught, noting if the lessons required more or less than the suggested time and whether additional resources or scaffolding were needed. At the end of the school year, teachers used the information to refine the curriculum maps.

A school's ability to act as a unified whole also depends on the elimination of programs, policies, and practices that inhibit coherence. As a principal of a school in improvement, Doggett recognized that while his school's turnaround plan included a focus on increased instructional effectiveness, the existing meeting structure did not support this objective. To address this issue, he revised the master schedule so that teachers attended fewer all-staff meetings, thereby allowing more time for professional learning team meetings. With this change, teachers had more time to collaborate and focus on improving instruction.

⁸ Cowan et al., 2012.

⁹ Jacobs, H. H., 1997; Jacobs, H. H., 2004.

¹⁰ Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A., 2005.

¹¹ Harris, A., 2002.

Insight 3 Provide clear communication.

Several elements of clear communication support school transformation efforts. The most basic element is informing staff, parents, and community members about what is happening at the school to improve teaching and learning. Pirtle used an online calendar to keep teachers informed and up-to-date on professional development, improvement initiatives, learning activities, and other school events. Additionally, she provided a weekly flyer that recognized staff and student achievements, shared staffs' implementation of successful strategies that led to improved student outcomes, provided dates for campus-oriented professional development, and reinforced progress made toward fulfilling the school's vision.

Research indicates that effective leaders facilitate communication among stakeholders in both formal and informal settings.¹⁰ As principal, Pirtle took steps to ensure that meetings were productive for all attendees. During meetings with parents, teachers shared information and learning tasks, thus encouraging both staff and parents to be responsible for problem solving. At the campus level, teachers were encouraged to approach instructional coaches with challenges and frustrations, and Pirtle trusted that the well-prepared coaches would provide support and guidance as intended. While she and the leadership team continued to monitor student progress and intervene if the expected improvements did not occur, allowing teachers and instructional coaches to play their roles enabled her to address other issues in the school.

Another key part of communication is maintaining transparency.¹¹ Nobody wants to shine the spotlight on their shortcomings, but transparency can be a way to involve stakeholders in the decision-making process. At meetings with family and community members, school leaders can share the appropriate school and grade-level data as allowed by privacy restrictions. School leaders can

highlight both accomplishments and challenges and outline how the school is going to address weaknesses. Family and community members then have an opportunity to collaboratively develop a plan that enables all stakeholders to support students and the school. Effective leaders are accessible to teachers, parents, and stakeholders and can maintain open lines of communication.¹² It is therefore important for leaders to have structures in place that enable staff and parents to participate in making decisions, become familiar with the learning goals, and collaboratively engage in leading the school improvement efforts.¹³

Insight 4 Monitor and review progress.

Monitoring and reviewing progress is an ongoing process that provides information on turnaround efforts for school improvement. To do this, school leaders need to establish a system to collect and analyze data from multiple sources, especially those relevant to the quality of the instructional program in the district and its schools. For example, a school might collect data on student academic progress through quarterly benchmarks, biweekly common assessments designed by the instructional coaches, and annual state-administered tests. As a turnaround school principal, Doggett also included data on teacher absences, student attendance and discipline, parent surveys, complaints and commendations from all stakeholders, quarterly grade distributions, and informal data from monthly meetings with support staff. These data helped him monitor the school climate and address both academic and nonacademic issues.

The data collected should indicate whether school improvement efforts are on track. Staff should have opportunities to analyze data and identify corrective action. Doggett held weekly data meetings with instructional coaches and teachers

to review student progress, identify challenges, and brainstorm solutions for each student's academic needs. In addition, meetings with school leadership teams and professional learning groups can identify specific interventions and assistance for students who do not demonstrate proficiency in a targeted area. These meetings also provide an opportunity to support those teachers who struggle to meet the expectations described in the improvement plans or delineated by student needs.



Insight 5 Provide resources and support.

Supporting staff in turnaround efforts means providing the resources, professional development, and time that teachers need to become proficient at their jobs. Studies have found that when teachers participate in ongoing, job-embedded professional development, they are more likely to implement what they learn than if they attend a one-time, off-site conference.¹⁴ To create these situations, principals provide collaboration time, during which teachers can examine student work, analyze instructional practices, and make instructional decisions based on student data. These activities can help advance a collaborative culture that develops teachers' capacity to engage in deep conversations about student learning and investigate teaching and learning connections and practices.¹⁵

In Pirtle's former district, for example, several transformation schools hired six substitute teachers

¹² Marzano et al., 2005, p. 47.

¹³ Cowan et al., 2012; Harris, 2002; Wallace Foundation, 2013.

¹⁴ Bryk et al., 2010; Cowan et al., 2012; Harris, 2002.

¹⁵ Bryk et al., 2010; Cowan et al., 2012; Harris, 2002.

trained in the schools' improvement initiatives. On designated days, those substitutes taught in classrooms while teachers attended in-school professional development sessions. During these events, school coaches modeled instructional strategies, provided professional development, helped teachers with planning, worked with them on data analysis, engaged in problem solving with teams, and coached teachers in other areas deemed necessary. With this arrangement, teachers did not have to leave campus and coaches had the time to work with many teachers, either individually or in groups. The teachers appreciated the coaches' support, and, more importantly, because the substitute teachers were trained in the school's curriculum and systems for working with the students, the teachers knew their students would not lose instructional time.

Insight **6** **Increase leaders' presence throughout schools and in the community.**

Leaders can engage actively in all aspects of teaching and learning by being visible daily throughout the school. This includes being present in classrooms during instruction; attending professional learning team meetings; and engaging in brief interactions with teachers, students, parents, and other stakeholders in hallways, cafeterias, playgrounds, and other gathering places in the building. As principal, Doggett conducted a walkthrough of the entire school every morning. In addition, all teachers expected a weekly classroom walkthrough by Doggett or a member of his leadership team. Because each walkthrough or observation had a predetermined focus, teachers knew what to expect. After a walkthrough or observation, a member of the leadership team provided the teacher with timely feedback and support. Such activities served two purposes: A leader's presence in the classroom and at meetings sends the message that what takes place there is

¹⁶ Bryk et al., 2010; Ferguson, C., Jordan, C., & Baldwin, M., 2010.



important. And, the principal or other school leaders can use the information provided to better support individuals or groups of teachers.

Maintaining a presence and regularly engaging with parents, students, and the community is another essential leadership function.¹⁶ This includes interacting with students before school, in hallways, in classrooms, in the cafeteria and library, and after school. Effective leaders also seek or create opportunities to interact with parents formally at events such as parent meetings and informally at social and sports events. In addition, they also find or create opportunities to interact with the community, not only by sharing information about the school but also by actively seeking community members' expectations for and views of the school.

Conclusion

Effective leadership at all levels of the education system is fundamental to improving student achievement, particularly in underperforming schools. Our experience and research suggest that turnaround leadership that focuses on the six insights outlined above can create the conditions necessary to shape a culture that places teaching, learning, and student achievement at the forefront of all improvement efforts.

References

- Bottoms, G., & Schmidt-Davis, J. (2010). *The three essentials: Improving schools requires district vision, district and state support, and principal leadership*. Atlanta, GA: Southern Regional Education Board.
- Bryk, A. S., Sebring, P. B., Allensworth, E., Easton, J. Q., & Luppescu, S. (2010). *Organizing schools for improvement: Lessons from Chicago*. Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.
- Copland, M. A., & Boatright E. (2006). *Leadership for transforming high schools*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.
- Cowan, D., Joyner, S., & Beckwith, S. (2012). *Getting serious about the system: A fieldbook for district and school leaders*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin Press.
- Ferguson, C., Jordan, C., & Baldwin, M., (2010). *Working systemically in action: Engaging family & community*. Austin, TX: SEDL.
- Hallinger, P., & Heck, R. (2009). Distributed leadership in schools: Does system policy make a difference? In A. Harris (Ed.), *Distributed leadership: Different perspectives* (pp. 101–120). Dordrecht, the Netherlands: Springer.
- Harris, A. (2002). *School improvement: What's in it for schools?* New York, NY: RoutledgeFalmer.
- Jacobs, H. H. (1997). *Mapping the big picture: Integrating curriculum & assessment K–12*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Jacobs, H. H. (Ed.). (2004). *Getting results with curriculum mapping*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Knapp, M. S., Copland, M. A., & Talbert, J. E. (2003). *Leading for learning: Reflective tools for school and district leaders*. Seattle, WA: Center for the Study of Teaching and Policy, University of Washington.
- Leithwood, K., Louis, K. S., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *How leadership influences student learning: Executive summary*. Minneapolis, MN: Center for Applied Research and Educational Improvement, University of Minnesota.
- Marzano, R. J., Waters, T., & McNulty, B. A. (2005). *School leadership that works: From research to results*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development.
- Murphy, J. (2010). Nine lessons for turning around failing schools. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 91(8), 93–97.
- Newmann, F. M., Smith, B., Allensworth, E., & Bryk, A. S. (2001). Instructional program coherence: What it is and why it should guide school improvement policy. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 23(4), 297–321.
- Wallace Foundation. (2013). *The school principal as leader: Guiding schools to better teaching and learning*. New York, NY: Author.

SEDL Insights is based on the experience, expertise, and research of SEDL staff. It is designed to give education practitioners practical suggestions for implementing school improvement strategies.

About SEDL

SEDL is a nonprofit education research, development, and dissemination organization based in Austin, Texas. Improving teaching and learning has been at the heart of our work throughout our near 50 years of service. SEDL partners with educators, administrators, parents, and policymakers to conduct research and development projects that result in strategies and resources to improve teaching and learning. SEDL also helps partners and clients bridge the gap between research and practice with professional development, technical assistance, and information services tailored to meet their needs.

To learn more about how SEDL can help you, contact us at info@sedl.org or 800-476-6861.

www.sedl.org

SEDL Insights

Authors: Sylvia Segura Pirtle, PhD, and Don Doggett, MEd
 Editor: Laura Shankland, MA, PMP
 Designer: Jane Thurmond

Copyright 2013 by SEDL

All photos are copyright Thinkstock.

You are welcome to reproduce issues of *SEDL Insights* and distribute copies at no cost to recipients. Please credit SEDL as publisher.