

## THE SEARCH FOR SIGNIFICANCE: LEADERSHIP LESSONS FROM THE FIELD

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Over the past decade, the authors have teamed to work closely with middle school educators in a variety of school districts across North Carolina. During this time, they observed numerous schools taking on the many challenges of federal and state accountability standards while maintaining a genuine focus on the developmental needs of adolescents. This partnership with schools has truly been a “work in progress” as schools experience “the good, the bad and the ugly” that often accompanies authentic and meaningful school renewal. This article provides some basic and reflective insight for school leaders considering the difficult, yet worthwhile, process of school improvement.

Combining theory, research and practice, L'Esperance, et al. (2003) created a model of school renewal that identified four basic categories of school performance. Rather than duplicating the typical sub-group measures found in federal and state accountability measures, these categories served as a spring-board for schools that desired a journey toward significance rather than simple compliance. With most teachers and principals understanding that schools are far more complex than the achievement categories outlined by federal and state accountability measures, these categories provided a type of “organizational snapshot” that created dialogue for reflection and self-evaluation. Since middle school culture can be dynamic and fluid, it is important to note that schools may exhibit one or

more characteristics from the following categories:

### School of Surrender

Faced with the overwhelming pressure of impending accountability sanctions, these schools have died. In reality, they long ago succumbed to low expectations and lack of a dynamic and shared vision for the future. An ethos of failure can permeate the campus through verbal and non-verbal cues which convey ...*no vision, no passion, no shared commitment to a plan*, and worst of all, *no hope for students*. While most schools would not fall into this overall category, some schools may have smaller areas within their school which may hold “pockets” of surrender. Essentially, people in this environment have given up.

### School of Survival

These schools function only at a survival level and typically remain in a reactive mode. The people in these settings have the desire to improve but have not discovered a “breakthrough” strategy to the next level of school improvement. Having exhausted every call from supervisors to work harder, “sweat equity” has probably yielded some initial results but fall short of growing AYP mandates. People in schools of survival often work hard in the daily struggles of just getting by. As they constantly “put out fires,” little

creative energy often remains to address and visualize long-term results.

### *Schools of Success*

These schools have been judged to be successful by most stakeholders. Indicators of high student attendance, low teacher turnover, and considerable parent involvement are just a few of the variables which have combined to give this school a reputation for high student achievement and positive school climate. Ironically, this success can present barriers for further school improvement because most people are happy with the status quo. This legacy of stability can cause a school to put little energy into considering further growth as an option and thus spends most energy in a maintenance mode.

### *Schools of Significance*

Schools of significance may evolve from any of the previously-mentioned categories. They are in the process of being transformed by a collective vision and a focus toward improvement. Their cultures are rich with indicators that are trending toward positive data in a variety of areas. They are in an ongoing mode of reflection and they are data-directed (not data-driven). They focus intently on specific achievement areas, yet they do not abandon the developmental needs of students. They are immersed in an environment where people trust each other as they work on solutions to problems and turn the solutions into results.

The initial step was for school leaders (administrators and teachers) to begin an honest dialogue about their schools. Stakeholders were surveyed to obtain

their impressions of their school. The results were utilized to begin a reflective conversation which is an essential step in authentic school renewal. This type of dialogue can become a rich source of new ideas and strategies for improving student achievement (Farrington, et al., 2005). Utilizing this self-assessment as a starting point, a school renewal effort began which customized *all* processes to meet the unique needs of each school district. The overall impact of the process has been the creation of learning organizations in large, urban systems such as Winston-Salem/Forsyth County in the Piedmont area or in small, rural systems such as Greene or Jones County in eastern North Carolina. The two basic areas of leadership focus common in each district were: 1) *overall strategic planning/coordination* and 2) *leadership coaching for principals*.

### *Overall Strategic Planning/Coordination*

This included ongoing sessions between a project director and district leaders to verbalize school vision and develop plans for turning the vision into a plan of action. Each district superintendent encouraged open discussions regarding the strengths and weaknesses of their respective organizations. Leaders at various levels throughout the district were involved in the analysis of historical and current data. Collaborative structures were put into place that evaluated the implementation of selected strategies and initiatives. In addition, the project director conducted both individual and small group coaching sessions to give very specific help as needed. This was especially beneficial for blending theory and reflective practice in the lives of busy professionals who are often

consumed with the everyday fundamentals of leading a large and complex organization. Over the course of the last several years, three school districts have developed a unique approach to this form of planning.

First, under the direction of Assistant Superintendent Dr. Angelia Fryer, Winston-Salem/Forsyth County Schools seventeen middle schools principals meet on a monthly basis to discuss selected targeted areas for school improvement. Principal's along with school based curriculum coordinator's and other key instructional staff provide data related to the implementation, monitoring and ongoing assessment of strategies. During this time a set of best practices is developed and shared with other school leaders.

Second, the principals of five schools and the director of the alternative program of Greene County Schools meet with Assistant Superintendent Dr. Patricia MacNeill to ensure that the all facets of the k-12 seamless approach to programs and policies are being met. The meetings focus on reflecting on the current culture of each school and providing data to support school improvement strategies.

The third example is taken from Jones County Schools in which Superintendent Dr. Lenker along with his district curriculum director meet monthly with the LEA's six principals to discuss and analyze the district's strategic plan and reflect on several data points. Based on this process, Jones County Schools used local and state-wide research to reconfigure the four elementary schools to pre K-6 this year in order to create what the district

believes is the most conducive learning environment for sixth grade middle level students. All three districts continue to improve academically as outlined by both No Child Left Behind and the state's ABC's accountability programs.

### *Leadership Coaching for Principals*

Leadership may be the most essential element in any human endeavor requiring a team effort. While the single most important influence on student achievement in the classroom is the quality of the teacher, the single most important factor in total school achievement is the quality of the principal. As a result, each district has customized some effort to provide staff development for principals with a focus on building leadership capacity. This takes different approaches depending on the district needs and includes whole-group activities pertaining to topics of shared interest and need; small group focus on specific areas and individual coaching for new principals. With an increasing number of veteran principals reaching retirement, individual coaching is designed to provide a mentoring/coaching environment that allows for safe reflection and dialogue. This was designed to enhance the maturing process for inexperienced administrators and reduce the likelihood of excessive burnout and/or derailment.

Preliminary examples of a coaching model were implemented in three North Carolina school districts. Jones County and Greene County are small, rural districts in the eastern portion of the state. During the 2005-2006 school year, these districts recognized the need to offer support for principals entering the first year of the principalship and

coaching was provided for two principals from each district. In addition, four principals from Winston-Salem/Forsyth County were also involved in a similar coaching relationship. Monthly sessions were scheduled and included a combination of individual and paired sessions with the leadership coach. The principals would spend this time reflecting on pertinent aspects of their role as principal and on emerging job-related issues. A critical aspect of the coaching relationship is the ongoing focus on the principal's growth as a leader and how increased leadership capacity can address the problems that emerge on the job.

With the coach serving as catalyst for reflective assessment, the new principal begins to find a "safe" place for critical analysis. During the first year, the principal will begin to log a brief journal of thoughts for future reflection, set personal goals for the year as well as for his/her career, develop a plan for growing a personal and professional network, conduct peer seminars for both professional growth, and get feedback from the principal's faculty on perceived effectiveness as principal. All coaching sessions are held in strict confidence so the principal and coach develop the trust needed for honest feedback. At the end of the 2005-2006 school year, each new principal demonstrated greater self-awareness and expressed confidence in their abilities as school leaders. While this initial effort was exploratory in nature, it holds great potential for ongoing efforts to assist both new and

veteran principals, particularly in the area of developing mentoring capacity within school districts.

### *Summary*

While history has provided many stories of failed programs delivered in the "cookie-cutter", one-size-fits-all approach, the above-mentioned strategies are an extremely brief summary of strategies that blend solid research with local needs to customize a "tailored" approach to effective school renewal. With the stakeholders "holding a true stake" in the development of these initiatives, these North Carolina school districts have provided overall positive data trends over a multi-year period.

As with any learning organization, new challenges (along with corresponding data) arise on a daily basis. Such an approach to process renewal continues to open the floor for additional questions and new possibilities. The authors have been inspired by the determination of these districts/schools as they continue to plot a course toward significance. The secret learned by these leaders is that *significance will not be achieved by the arrival of a predetermined or prescribed program but in a process that is purpose-driven, data-directed, and people-centered.* This balanced approach holds great promise for middle schools striving to reach significance in student achievement while addressing the developmental needs of adolescents.

### *References*

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