

Leading edge: Are you looking out the window or in a mirror?

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I was working recently with a high school staff in Southern California as we explored strategies the school could use to help its students achieve at higher levels. Midway through our discussion, a staff member asked, "We have 36 students in our classrooms. Our counseling staff has been cut to the bone. We haven't been able to purchase new textbooks for several years. What can you do to help us get the resources we need to improve our school?"

I fully understood the exasperation that prompted her question. To say that California has been decimated by budget problems would be an understatement. The literal meaning of decimate is to reduce by one-tenth. California schools have seen their resources cut by far more than 10%. This quandary of demanding that schools get better results than ever at the same time that they are facing severe budget cuts is not reserved for the Golden State. It is a challenge facing schools throughout North America. The frustration educators are feeling is palpable to anyone working with schools today.

I believe that the teacher who raised the question is well-intentioned and wants to help all of her students learn. She was not simply trying to exonerate herself from responsibility for student learning. In fact, her question had a tone of desperation. She was genuinely seeking advice on how to obtain the resources that would enable her and her colleagues to do a better job of raising student achievement.

I could have offered some cliché on how all of us need to become more politically active to get the resources we need. However, educators have become a major political force, working tirelessly to shape the agenda of scores of politicians who have pledged to become the next education president, or governor, or minister. I could have offered some bromide about how we need to educate the public regarding the challenges we are facing. In fact, we must do a far better job of portraying to the public the realities we confront in our schools. But I have no great insights for doing so. Ultimately, I chose not to resort to such dodges in an effort to brush aside her question. I answered her honestly and admitted I was unable to offer a viable strategy for acquiring the resources she sought for her school. This clearly was not the response for which she had hoped.

I then asked the staff to brainstorm for five minutes to come up with ideas for improving student achievement in their school. I have asked this question in a number of settings, and educators rarely have difficulty generating a list of potential improvements. This faculty quickly generated the following list:

1. More financial support from the state;
2. Smaller class sizes;
3. More support staff to assist students - teacher aides, counselors, social workers, etc.;
4. Fewer preparations for teachers;
5. More supportive parents;

6. The abolition of state testing;
7. Higher teacher salaries to attract people into the profession;
8. More planning time for teachers;
9. Fewer initiatives from the central office;
10. Financial support for teachers to attend professional workshops or enroll in graduate courses;
11. Better academic preparation for students in the middle schools;
12. Better facilities;
13. More access to technology for staff and students;
14. Students with a stronger work ethic and reduced sense of entitlement; and
15. More current textbooks and instructional materials.

At the conclusion of this exercise, I explained that I could endorse most items on their list as things that would benefit them and their school. I asked, however, that they also consider another list of ideas for improving student achievement. That list included:

1. Academic goals for every student that were so clear, focused, and widely understood that students taking the same course from different teachers were ensured the opportunity to learn the same essential curriculum;
2. Close monitoring of each student's learning on a frequent and timely basis through the use of formative assessments that helped identify problem areas both for students in general and individual students;
3. A systematic plan to give extra time and support to students experiencing initial difficulty in learning;
4. Strong parent partnerships with the school based on frequent two-way communication between the home and school;
5. Meaningful and timely information to every teacher clarifying how well his or her students had met school learning goals compared with colleagues' students;
6. A collaborative culture in which teachers worked together in teams to analyze student achievement on common assessments, developed strategies to improve the current levels of achievement, and helped each other build on their strengths and address their weaknesses;
7. A general assumption that it is the school's job to see to it that students learn rather than merely be taught, and the expectation that all students can and should learn at high levels; and
8. A safe and orderly school environment with clear parameters for student behavior, consistent enforcement of those parameters, and an overarching stipulation that members of the school community treat each other with mutual respect.

I then asked the staff to compare and contrast the two lists. One of the most significant differences was readily apparent. All of the proposals on the first list called for someone other than the staff to take the action necessary to improve the school. Staff members themselves could initiate items on the second list. Teachers debated whether they had the autonomy to initiate the ideas on the second list. Ultimately, they grudgingly acknowledged that the factors on the second list did lie within their sphere of influence, while those on the first list did not.

Another difference between the two lists warranted particular emphasis. The items on the second list have a much more powerful impact on student achievement than those on the first. Research over 35 years confirms that when schools create these conditions, they have a significant, positive

effect on student learning (Georgiades, Fuentes, & Snyder, 1983; Lezotte, 1997; Marzano, 2003; Newmann & Associates, 1996; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2001).

Educators who honestly confront these facts will face conflicting emotions. On the one hand, it is reasonable and right for educators to convey to the public the urgency of situations they confront and the pressing need for more resources to meet the enormous challenges they face. On the other hand, they also must acknowledge that there is much they can and should do to improve conditions for teaching and learning in their schools. It is clear that students would be better served if they were taught in classes of 20 rather than 36, if teacher salaries reflected the significance of the work they are asked to do, and if states and school districts were governed by more enlightened policies. But it is equally clear that these changes are not absolute prerequisites for helping more students learn at higher levels.

Ultimately, educators must make a choice between two school improvement strategies. The first strategy, which I call the "if only" approach, bases hopes for school improvement on others: "if only the school board would reduce class sizes, if only the parents were more supportive, if only the students were better prepared and more motivated." The focus is outward as we look for others to solve our problems.

The other strategy is to focus on the conditions that lie within our sphere of influence. This can-do strategy shifts the focus inward as we begin to ask, "What can we do to monitor each student's learning on a timely basis, to respond with more time and support when a student struggles, to create time within the school day to work collaboratively?" Schools that resort to the "if only" strategy spend their time looking out the window for the solutions to their problems. Schools that commit to the can-do strategy spend their time looking in the mirror. Which way are you looking?

References

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