

EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP EVERYDAY LEADERSHIP

Sustaining a Vision of Rigor

Sustaining your progress in becoming a more rigorous school is possible even in tough economic times.

**By Ronald Williamson and
Barbara R. Blackburn**

Ronald Williamson is a professor of leadership and counselling at Eastern Michigan University.

Barbara R. Blackburn is an assistant professor in the Department of Middle, Secondary, and K-12 Education at the University of North Carolina-Charlotte.

They are the coauthors of The Principalship From A to Z and Rigorous Schools and Classrooms: Leading the Way, both published by Eye on Education (www.eyoneducation.com). Material for this column is adapted from these books.

Even with the best planning and supportive implementation, your school will experience challenges to achieving its vision of increased rigor. One of today's most serious issues is how schools can improve when resources are stagnant or even declining.

Virtually every school faces dwindling resources and is caught between the expectation that student performance will improve and the reality that there are fewer human and financial resources to support its work. These economic realities present a real challenge to improving the rigor of a school. Too often, schools respond to the situation by deferring improvements or looking for ways to reduce programs and services. How can you sustain your efforts to improve rigor while using your resources even more efficiently?

There are generally three responses to this problem. First, you can identify areas where the school might reduce expenditures. You should carefully consider, however, whether those reductions would be enough and what effects they would have on the school: one district we know considered reducing their classroom supply budget but recognized that even if the entire amount were eliminated, it would not solve the budget shortfall. We suggest identifying those programs that are expensive but do not raise student performance.

Second, consider alternative ways of doing things you already do. For example, some rural districts find that going to a four-day week reduces the cost of transportation, food service, and office support. Those savings can then be used to support instruction. Or you might organize a book study

group as a way to provide professional development, rather than using traditional workshops and speakers. Identify and implement instructional practices that are inexpensive but that have a great impact on students.

The third approach is to prioritize what the school is doing. This is very difficult because even when you use data, decisions are almost always perceived as valuing one program more than others. When you prioritize, you must anchor your decisions in your school's vision and mission. For example, you would not want to eliminate programs that provide additional support to students if your vision is that every student achieves at very high levels. Ensure that every practice supports the vision of a more rigorous school.

The vision of a more rigorous school does not need to be set aside during tough economic times. We believe that the curricular, instructional, and assessment practices of teachers are the key to rigor. Momentum in the classroom can be maintained even in difficult times.

As you reconsider how to provide the essential supports needed for more rigorous classrooms, you may want to work with other schools or districts to share professional development resources or find a local business leader who would support your advocacy efforts with families and the community. It might also be possible to increase your efforts to identify volunteers, such as senior citizens, to work with students. Making such decisions is almost always better when teachers, families, and other stakeholder groups are included. Be sure that the decisions support your vision for your school.

Turnover in Leadership

A major effect of the challenging economic environment is the turnover in leadership. It has been projected that more than 50% of principals could retire in the next five years. Besides the possibility of retirement, the career track for many principals is to move to larger schools with greater responsibility or to a central office or superintendent's position.

Leadership changes make it difficult for schools to sustain their visions. One of the most important things that you can do increase leadership capacity in your school and ensure a continued commitment to the shared vision is to expand leadership capacity in others. In some schools, "others" may mean the formal leaders, such as assistant principals, department chairs, and team leaders. But we believe that leadership goes beyond those formal roles, so it's important to develop the leadership skills of a cross-section of your staff.

Develop Leadership Capacity

Nurturing leadership skills among school staff members involves creating a school that offers a variety of leadership roles, opportunities for inquiry and reflection, and chances to learn and develop new skills.

To help staff members expand their skills and knowledge base:

- Invite them to work on projects outside their areas of expertise
- Ask them to help screen and interview potential employees
- Encourage them to attend district-level meetings with you
- Ask them to work with you

in dealing with challenging parents.

To involve staff members in school leadership:

- Invite them to work on school improvement projects
- Ask them to serve on the school leadership team
- Ask them to lead a book study group
- Invite them to lead a curriculum planning committee

To provide staff members with opportunities to observe and reflect:

- Encourage them to maintain journals and reflect on the "good," "bad," or "flawed" leaders they know and observe
- Talk with them about how and why you handled a situation as you did.

To support staff members' participation in professional development:

- Ask them to serve as mentors of new teachers
- Encourage them to join and be involved with professional organizations
- Ask them to present information to the staff after attending conferences or other professional development activities (NASSP, 2009).

Commit and Recommit to the Vision

Sustainability is a function of shared vision and a commitment to continuous learning and collaborative work.

Maintain your school's sense of purpose by using the language of your vision when working with teachers, families, and community groups. Keeping the vision "front and center" will help maintain forward momentum. We recommend that you:



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Principal Leadership

Writer's Guidelines

Principal Leadership seeks manuscripts that will enhance that professional capacity of secondary school principals, assistant principals, and other school leaders. Manuscripts should describe best practices, including evidence of success and challenges; consider replicability and implications for other principals; and include tips, advice, resources, and examples for sidebars. Desired length is 2,000 words, inclusive of references.

To submit, please e-mail the manuscript in MS Word format to plmag@principals.org. Include a cover letter with contact information and a mailing address for each author, a two-sentence author biography for each author, and a statement of intent to submit exclusively to *Principal Leadership*. If a manuscript is accepted for publication, the author will be required to sign a transfer of intellectual property to NASSP. For detailed guidelines, please visit www.principals.org/pl_guidelines.

THEMES FOR 2010

SEPTEMBER 2010

Behavior and Discipline

Wherever a group of adolescents gather with adults in charge, behavior and discipline become a factor. Learn from theories of development, motivation, and rewards from the valuable experiences of others.

Extended Deadline: May 24, 2010

OCTOBER 2010

Unique Student Populations

Often, educating small populations of students requires seemingly disproportionate amounts of time and money. Learn more about resources and strategies for accommodations and inclusion for student populations, such as special education, ELL, and physical disability.

Deadline: June 7, 2010

NOVEMBER 2010

The State of Literacy

Being literate encompasses skills that foster advanced thinking, literary analysis, improved writing and growth in many curricular areas. Once students master reading, the fun is just starting.

Deadline: July 5, 2010

DECEMBER 2010

College Readiness

Schools, students, and parents have to begin planning for the postsecondary years in the middle grades so that students know what they need to be able to do to move on to college, training, or other pursuits.

Deadline: August 9, 2010

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- Talk about the vision when meeting with teachers, families, and community members
 - Identify leaders among the staff who should be given opportunities to develop their leadership skills
 - Guard against low-priority projects that can take attention away from the vision
 - Work closely with new staff members to ensure that they are familiar with the school's culture and vision
 - Provide time to reflect and process the work at the end of every faculty meeting and other professional development opportunity
 - Rotate leadership responsibilities to expand capacity
 - Celebrate successes.
- The most successful schools are those where leadership is broad and deep. In those schools, many people have formal and informal leadership roles and there is a shared commitment to deepening their collective leadership capacity. **PL**

REFERENCE

- NASSP. (2009). Practical suggestions for developing leadership capacity. Retrieved from www.principals.org/Content.aspx?topic=56566.

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