

TRANSFORMING SCHOOLS: Lessons from Successful School Principals

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High school principals struggle to balance competing priorities---how to balance the day-to-day operational needs of their schools, and simultaneously strengthen and enhance their school's program to provide every student with access to a high quality academic experience. Demands for greater accountability, more rigorous curriculum, and strong family-school relationships characterize their work.

While teaching aspiring principals and superintendents for the past twelve years I was regularly asked to describe the things that successful principals do, that set them, and their schools, apart from other leaders and their schools. Those conversations launched a twelve-year study to learn about principal behaviors that transformed their schools.

Data were gathered from surveys and on-site visits to more than seventy secondary schools in all regions of the country. During these visits I talked with principals, interviewed teachers and students, reviewed school documents and, in most cases, talked with the principals' supervisors. After each visit I reviewed these data and arranged for one or two follow-up visits to each site. These visits either confirmed or refuted initial impressions.

Core Principles

A set of core operating principles, used by principals to improve their schools, emerged from the work in these schools and parallel many of the approaches that Peters and Waterman (1982) found in America's best-run companies. Each of the principles will be discussed in some detail and illustrated with examples from secondary schools.

These six principles illustrate the evolving role of principals, from manager to instructional leader, and from director to facilitator.

Articulate a Compelling Vision and Mission – A clear and compelling vision and mission drove every aspect of the school's program and every school program was aligned with the mission.

Improve Instruction as the Core Work – Improving both teaching and learning was the central task of the school. All other functions were secondary and every school activity was reviewed to assure that it supported the school's core work.

Strengthen Home-Family-School Connections – Strong, positive relationships with families was central to the school's mission. The vital role of families in support of students' academic work was recognized and encouraged.

Build Relationships with the Most Challenging Students – Developing and sustaining positive relationships with every student, but particularly the most challenging, was central to achieving the school’s core work.

Create a Structure that Values Collaboration – Collaborative work, at every level of the organization, was essential to accomplishing the school’s core mission of improving student learning. Increasing organizational capacity complemented efforts to improve individual teacher performance.

Do Whatever It Takes – An unwavering commitment to do whatever it takes to assure a high quality educational experience for every student characterized the work of principals.

One of the most important findings was that these principles, while of independent value, are especially powerful when working together.

In order to understand these principles more fully each will be discussed in detail and illustrated by examples of successful principals.

Articulate a Compelling Vision and Mission

Nothing was more important to these principals than articulating a clear and compelling vision for their school. Almost always the vision was one developed with teachers, staff and families but it was uniformly driven by the vision of the principal. More importantly, the vision became a living statement that was used to measure the value and importance of every school activity. Programs and practices that did not align with the vision and mission were modified or abandoned.

Linda Jolly, Principal of Midland High School in west Texas was appointed principal with the task of improving student achievement, particularly for the school’s children of color. Linda said “the school, while good, wasn’t getting the results we needed for many students. Good wasn’t good enough. We had to refocus and make a commitment to every student’s success.”

Working with the staff, Linda examined the school’s mission statement to assure its focus on the core work. As a result the statement begins with a simple, very clear statement---“We, the faculty of Midland Senior High School, believe that our primary purposes are teaching and learning.”

The challenge of any mission statement is in its implementation. Recent data about student learning indicated a need for changes in the mathematics program. While many students were challenged and very successful, others were underserved by the current offerings and instructional practices. Linda was clear with her staff about the need for change. This led nearly the entire department to transfer, retire or leave the school. Undaunted, Linda enthusiastically launched a search for teachers.

Rather than retreat from the school’s mission, she saw the staff changes as an opportunity to recruit and hire faculty who shared her vision for Midland High and were committed to assuring the academic success of every student, regardless of ability or background.

Tom Shearer arrived at Mt. Tahoma High in Tacoma, Washington with a clear commitment to changing the culture of his school. He immediately placed the focus on improving the instructional program by using data about student learning to guide every decision. He also secured a grant to fund the training of the entire teaching staff in the techniques used by Advanced Placement teachers. This resulted in increased rigor and higher expectations for the achievement of all students.

When Mt. Tahoma moved into a new facility the school was organized into a set of small interdisciplinary learning communities, each provided support staff and resources to design an educational experience for their students. The organization of the school supported by the selection and training of personnel, transformed Tom Shearer's vision into reality.

Across the continent Charles Dluzniewski became principal of MS #53 located in the Rockaway Beach area of New York City. The school looked like a fortress when it was first visited---locked doors, metal detectors at the main entrance, police patrolling the exterior. Charles would not accept this reality for this school and over three years transformed the school by organizing, nurturing and sustaining a community group composed of parents and community leaders. He invited several staff to seek other employment opportunities and he re-wrote the job description of his Assistant Principals and Instructional Coordinators. Their new role was to focus on improving the quality of teaching and to build positive relationships with students.

A remarkable transformation occurred. MS #53 became a community center hosting a variety of school and community functions. Staff morale improved, student absenteeism declined, test scores rose. During a visit one student remarked, "Mr. K really cares about us. I feel really safe here and able to focus on my studies."

Each of these principals had a vision for their students and their school. They acted on that vision, overcoming hurdles that often had been accepted by prior principals. Their commitment and their drive truly transformed their schools.

Improving Instruction is the Core Work

Providing every student with a quality educational program and assuring that every teacher was a skilled instructional expert characterized the work of principals. No other role was of greater importance than working to improve teaching and learning.

Principals recognized that the core work in their school was improving the quality of instruction and improving student learning. They worked with teachers and Department Heads to assure a skilled instructional expert in each classroom.

When Richard Barajas became Principal of Milby High School in Houston he inherited a school with a need to improve its curricular and instructional program. He immediately identified resources that could be deployed to improve student learning. Using data about his students' learning he organized the school into three instructional units and built a schedule that provided common planning time for content area teachers in each unit. Principal Barajas expected each group to meet weekly, discuss lesson plans, develop common assessments that would be used, and then meet to discuss the results of these assessments.

Over time a culture of achievement emerged at Milby. The relationships between teachers changed dramatically. Rather than working in isolation, teachers found that the

opportunity to work with colleagues around the core work, good teaching, both motivating and productive. Using the common assessments teachers were able to target gaps in student learning that led to improvement in student test scores.

Principal Abel Morado of Tucson High Magnet School describes himself as a “provocateur” because he constantly reviews data and asks questions about his students’ success. He insists that conversation about teaching and learning practices permeate his school and he is never satisfied with the level of achievement. “If we don’t constantly challenge ourselves to get better, then we get complacent and satisfied with the status quo. We’re a good school and many of our students are very successful but that doesn’t mean we can’t improve,” said Abel.

Naperville, IL is an affluent suburb of Chicago known for its rich and varied school curriculum and consistently high test scores. Despite the district’s success with many students Naperville struggles to address the needs of students who are less successful in school. The tendency for some staff is to criticize families and other external factors for the student’s lack of success.

During the late 1990’s the district reorganized its secondary schools and redesigned the instructional program. The emphasis was on a clearly defined curriculum with common assessments, supported by teaching teams with common planning time. Principals recognized that the work of teams during their common planning needed to be primarily about teaching and learning. They asked, and received from the district, a commitment that they would not be called to any meetings outside of their school on Tuesday or Thursday. Those two days the principals and assistant principals met with teams and focused the conversation on curricular and instructional practice.

The commitment of these principals demonstrates the importance of aligning their work, and the work of their faculty, with the core work---improved teaching and learning.

Strengthen Home-Family-School Connections

The principals in this study recognized the important role that families play in supporting the school’s academic mission. They valued familial involvement in their school’s program, and were particularly attentive to building relationships with families that traditionally are not involved in school life.

These principals also recognized the role that many of their student’s had in their families. Many students held jobs that contributed significantly to their family’s income. Principals found ways to minimize the conflicts between school and family and to assure that regardless of circumstances, the school’s core work was supported.

Richard Barajas in Houston discovered that some of his students were leaving school in the afternoon. Rather than assume that they were being truant he was concerned that as a result of non-attendance, they would fail classes and drop out of school. When he investigated their reasons for leaving Richard found that in several cases students left school to go to work because they were one of their family’s primary sources of income. Armed with this knowledge, Richard worked with the students to and the staff to adjust the students’ schedule so that they could attend class early in the day and then go to work.

Building supportive relationships with all parents was one of the hallmarks of Chuck Dluzniewski’s work in New York City. His school served a diverse community of upper

middle class families as well as low-income families. Student from low-income neighborhoods were bused to his school and their parents less involved with school. Chuck arranged a series of meetings in community centers in his school's neighborhoods. The meetings had sporadic attendance initially but he persisted and over time built a positive reputation with some of his school's most reluctant parents. He invited other staff to attend the sessions and meet parents. After five years they have become one of the defining activities at this school.

These principals were committed to establishing and sustaining a respectful relationship with the families of their students. They understood and capitalized on the positive impact that parents could have on student success.

Build Relationships with the Most Challenging Students

Nearly every recommendation for improving the American high school includes strategies for creating a more personal environment. These efforts at personalization often focus on structural changes such as block scheduling, advocacy programs, and long-term student-teacher relationships.

Many of these structural reforms were present in the schools we identified but these principals recognized that regardless of structure it was important that they nurture and sustain personal relationships with all students but particularly with those most challenged students.

This finding is particularly significant because of the evidence that one of the most important ways to reduce school dropouts is to assure that every student has a positive relationship with at least one adult. Many students develop these relationships through athletic or music programs. Other students are naturally drawn to a teacher because of their interest in the subject. But for many others there is no strong connection with any adult in the school.

Phil Brockman, principal of Ballard High School in Seattle is an ever-present figure in Ballard's classrooms, hallways and cafeteria. As he wanders the building he speaks to student after student, inquiring about their day but also asking about their school work, their families and their co-curricular activities. Phil described the importance of spending time with students, "I can't ever spend enough time getting to know students, understanding the things they care about and the things that impact their life outside of school. The more they know I care, and others at Ballard care, the more likely they are to see this school as a place they want to be."

At Roosevelt High School in Chicago, principal Alejandra Alvarez enthusiastically embraced the Advancement with Individual Determination (AVID) Program, an initiative to provide academic support for students and prepare them for college eligibility and success. It is particularly targeted at minority, rural, low-income and other students from families without a tradition of college attendance. The project provided intervention programs as well as skill building and helped build a positive relationship with Roosevelt's primarily Latino students.

These examples illustrate the impact that principals can have on student success by recognizing the importance of advocating for and serving students traditionally underserved by schools.

Create a Structure that Values Collaboration

Formal and informal collaborative groups were the hallmark of these schools. Principals recognized that to assure the success of every student required less emphasis on individual work and greater reliance on the power of organizational collaboration.

They tapped into long-standing organizational groups such as content area departments and School Improvement Teams but were comfortable establishing fluid and dynamic work groups focused on immediate tasks. These principals were not constrained by the norms of pre-existing groups.

Most importantly these principals recognized that truly effective schools must move beyond a primary focus on developing the knowledge and skills of individual teachers to building capacity for the organization. These schools were characterized by intentionally constructed connections between individuals and groups. These connections provided more meaningful relationships and centered on the core work---a shared commitment to improving instruction and student learning.

At Fox Technical High School in San Antonio principal Nancy York worked with her staff to create four small teaching units. Each unit is responsible for the primary instruction of a group of students. Additionally, these units are responsible for monitoring student success, using common assessments and work samples, and adjusting their instruction to improve student learning. Nancy reported that “since we moved to these small groups there has been a clearer commitment to the success of every student. We continue to improve and to develop the skills to work with one another. It’s amazing what we can learn from one another about good teaching.”

More than just meeting, the focus of unit meetings at Fox Tech was on issues of teaching and learning rather than student management. This intentional emphasis is what transformed the units from a collection of individual teachers to a collaborative body committed to a shared vision of improved student learning.

In southeastern Arizona Joel Todd, principal of Willcox High School recognized that ninth grade was a pivotal year for many students. It was during that year that many chose to leave school. During his first year as principal he worked closely with his teaching staff to build connections between those teachers who worked with ninth graders. They met routinely, shared instructional strategies, and worked on developing common approaches to classroom management, assignment of homework, and instruction. This led to curricular links between subjects and a more coherent program for Willcox High School’s ninth graders.

Ken Wallace, principal of North Shore High School, near Houston created book study groups among his staff. He carefully selected books shared by the staff of *The Principals’ Partnership* or from the Model Schools Consortium, provided copies for staff to read, and provided time during team, content and school meetings for the staff to discuss the books, share their learning and talk about how they could use this learning to improve the school. Shared readings were a common way that principals created a climate that encouraged learning together.

These examples illustrate the purposeful and intentional adoption of collaborative structures designed to improve their school’s instructional program. Collaborative work was seen as a powerful tool to stimulate improvement in the core work.

Do Whatever It Takes

Principals reflected an unwavering commitment to do whatever it took to assure success for students. They exhibited a “bias for action” that permeated every aspect of their work.

When programs or strategies failed to achieve desired results these principals quickly worked with staff to identify new approaches. They rarely spent time analyzing past action and almost uniformly focused on the future. While comfortable with data, these principals were not constrained by the data at hand. They emphasized responsiveness and action.

When Susan Montoya became principal of Tucumcari High School in New Mexico she found that the school had an open campus for lunch. She quickly learned that many students either didn't return from lunch or returned after engaging in inappropriate or illegal activities. Committed to stopping these behaviors and changing the culture of the school she instituted a closed campus lunch program for ninth graders. Since the school had no lunchroom it required identifying space in an unused woodshop and converting it into a lunchroom.

Despite resistance from nearby fast food restaurants and from senior students Susan persisted. She reports, that her “ninth graders are now more focused in the afternoon, more attentive to their teachers and behavior has improved.” Susan plans to extend the closed campus lunch program to the 10th grade in the coming year.

At Pahrnagat Valley High School in Alamo, Nevada principal Steve Hansen was concerned with the meager curricular offerings for students. Of particular concern was the lack of courses in the arts. Because of the school's small size, classes focused on core curricular subjects with just a handful of electives, classes matched to the teaching interests of staff.

Steve worked with his staff and district personnel to create a schedule that included a slightly longer school day with each class meeting a longer time. In exchange, once each quarter the regular program was suspended for two weeks so that students could participate in a set of elective courses that included the visual and performing arts. He worked closely with community groups to provide materials and staff to assist with these classes. As a result his students' maintained their core academic program but had increased opportunity to develop their skills in important elective subjects.

At MS #61 in Queens, New York the majority of students speak French and are first generation refugees from Haiti. The language barrier created a significant language hurdle for teachers. Rather than accept the status quo and lament the difficulties of communicating with students and their families a course of action was charted by principal Rhonda Hurdle to find teachers and volunteers who spoke French and could work with students and their families to assure that students were provided a solid academic experience. Rhonda was criticized by the teacher's union and by some of her superiors for not following established personnel procedures but she persisted. Her school now has a cadre of staff who support students in their dual language environment.

In a small high school outside of St. Louis Jonathan Heerboth had a language arts teacher resign late in August. The pool of applicants did not include anyone who shared

Jonathan's vision for a literacy rich language arts program. Rather than hire someone without this vision he started the year with a substitute teacher and continued the search. Late in September an appropriate applicant emerged and as Jonathan said, "transformed the way we approach the teaching of reading and writing."

In each of these examples the principals, guided by a compelling vision for their school, adopted a non-traditional course of action. They did whatever it took to address the issue and provide their students with a sound educational experience.

Conclusion

What principals talk about and pay attention to becomes important. Nothing characterized the work of principals in this study more than that maxim. They held clear values about the core work of schools, were driven to work collaboratively with teachers, staff and families to assure high quality educational experiences for every student, and were unwavering in their commitment to "do whatever it takes" to assure success for all students.

Their steadfastness, their tenacity, their vision propelled their schools forward in the face of what appeared to be insurmountable obstacles. These schools were markedly different because of their principals and their leadership.

Reference:

Peters, T. & Waterman, R. (1982). *In search of excellence*. New York: HarperCollins.

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