

Architects of Change

The power of teams to create change

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As educators we are committed to making a tangible impact on student performance. Planning the work and working the plan is a key success factor if we want to excel in our role as change agents.

As the superintendent for Hampton School District One in South Carolina, I am constantly challenged by intelligent, wonderfully determined principals and teachers who serve as endless resources for creative ideas for improving how teachers teach and how students learn. This follows naturally from our district mandate to “successfully challenge all students on or above grade level every day”.

But often a key challenge for superintendents is convincing educators to reach consensus regarding a new idea or initiative and then work as a team to implement a plan that will improve student learning at all grade levels. Over the past 24 years, having served as a band director, assistant principal, principal, and now superintendent, I have learned a few techniques that you may find useful for building teams that consistently make sound decisions and perhaps more importantly, follow through on those decisions with action plans.

Achieving consensus means more than getting a group to make a decision. It means having the will and the drive as a team to implement a plan of action. Once a decision is made everyone must work together to support it: from parents, teachers, administrators, board members, and even custodians, bus drivers, clerical staff, and cafeteria staff. How do you secure that level of stakeholder support without ruffling feathers or appearing autocratic? It may mean establishing a different type of relationship or role as superintendent with your team(s): becoming a master facilitator and truly serving as the instructional leader of the district. Instructional leadership means not only placing the emphasis on continuous school improvement but more directly onto instructional improvements that lead to enhanced student learning and performance. The superintendent must know what good classroom instruction looks like, what best practices are for both planning and delivering instruction, and be willing to visit classrooms and participate in a collaborative process with all stakeholders in order to improve teaching and learning, because before student achievement can improve, teaching must improve.

A CHANGE AGENT

Effective leaders do not come to the table with a solution hammered out. They create opportunities for people to work together and share in the decision-making process. They will accept ideas of others while providing leadership and a vision for the big picture. The superintendent must possess a mental image of what the future for his/her district looks like and must relay this vision to all stakeholders through his/her actions. As superintendent I try to facilitate a process that will achieve the appropriate level of involvement of stakeholders—one that will involve them in the decisions that will affect their day-to-day work. As a facilitator, I want to correlate new district and school initiatives with existing effective initiatives so that they do not create a conflict with our strategic plan and collective vision. In other words, all initiatives must enhance others or you will create a fragmented, non-focused environment that does not promote continuous school improvement leading to the ultimate goal of improved student achievement.

This philosophy consistently makes me more effective as a change agent in my role as superintendent. A personal motto that I use to keep my teams motivated and focused is “We must always strive to do a better job today than we did yesterday.”

INVEST IN TEAM BUILDING

Creating opportunities for the right people to meet and share ideas at the right time is critical to the decision-making process and to ultimately building consensus. In our district we have created a number of opportunities to enable people to come together at all levels within our district in order to collaborate. These opportunities enable individuals to share ideas while taking ownership of a plan that will impact their work. In our district, for example, we have a number of meeting forums that engage people at all levels. These include:

Annual Leadership Retreat: a two-day summer planning retreat where all of our principals and senior administrators come together to agree on where we’re going during the coming year and to identify top priorities. This retreat is clearly designed and structured as a team leadership meeting and not an administrative exercise. I invite our team to suggest items for the agenda in addition to adding my own. Prior to the annual planning meeting we also decide on a book that we will study and review together as a leadership team. Recently we reviewed “Failure is Not an Option: Six Principles That Guide Student Achievement in High Performing Schools” by Alan M. Blankstein. This not only provides an opportunity for professional development, but we use a discussion of the book as a springboard to the collaborative process and to facilitate meaningful discussion on a host of learning and performance issues. I ask participants to form pairs and assume responsibility for leading a discussion on a given chapter. It’s all part of a philosophy and belief in continuous improvement and a commitment to life-long learning: walking-the-talk so to speak! While this book review is only a small part of our planning retreat, it is important in terms of establishing the right type of working relationship with my leadership team. We also spend considerable time discussing potential new initiatives as well as reviewing plans that we have already implemented to ensure our curriculum, instruction, and assessment are aligned. Prior to the annual leadership retreat, I meet with the board of trustees for a two-day planning retreat and we follow the same format, creating a collaborative relationship focused on our ultimate goal of improving student achievement. The board’s mantra is “it’s all about the children.”

Monthly Leadership Meetings: these meetings usually last all day. We always begin these meetings discussing student achievement, teaching, learning and best practices while reporting on the action plans that we committed to during our annual retreat. It is very important to lead these meetings with improving teaching and learning in mind so that any discussion about achievement is put into the appropriate educational context. Ultimately, the overriding goal of our annual planning and monthly leadership meetings is to ensure that we are working the plan and doing everything we can at the district-level to assist every school with becoming a high-performing school. Anything I am considering doing that will impact the entire district is discussed at the monthly meetings—if not introduced at the summer planning session. These meetings in particular are critical forums for gathering and sharing information from across the leadership team and ensuring that we are working together to accomplish what we agreed to do.

Superintendent Advisory Council: I meet quarterly with our “teachers of the year” from each school. These meetings are designed to review and discuss best practices across the entire educational system. At these meetings we are looking to determine what is working in our schools in addition to discussing what is not working or what we need to do to ensure success. These meetings are also designed to provide an opportunity for any employee in the district to voice opinions, concerns or even celebrations regarding their school or the district. Every teacher of the year from each school asks for input and items for the agenda from each employee at their respective school for the superintendent advisory council meeting agenda. I respond to each item and minutes of the meeting are e-mailed to every employee in the district.

Vertical Teams: We have representatives of each discipline (math, English Language Arts, science, and social studies) from every school in our district meet regularly to share in the decision-making process whenever we are introducing a new initiative. Once established, these types of self-managing teams become strategic assets to leverage and are crucial for facilitating consensus-building at all levels in the district and ultimately to the implementation of any plan.

PLANNING IS EVERYTHING

Having the right teams in place is only part of the equation. I believe that if you fail to plan, you plan to fail. You just have to make the mistake one time and you will remember this forever.

In our district we have determined five steps for planning, which help to work with multiple stakeholders. This process is one that we revisit for any district-wide initiative that has the potential to impact student performance in a positive way.

Step 1: Set clear objectives: Make certain that each self-managing team knows exactly what is expected of them before they start planning. Your outcome hinges on how clearly you define success and what measurements you will use to track it. For instance I tell my teams upfront what they are expected to present to the stakeholders as part of any decision. This practice instills the highest degree of accountability.

Step 2: Assign ownership: There is only so much that any leader can do in their capacity as superintendent. I know that I can only be successful if I motivate, and empower, my teams to take ownership of the challenge and effectively engage them in pursuit of a clear goal. When they take ownership of the challenge, I know they will own and implement the solution.

Step 3: Define the “non-negotiables”: Some factors cannot budge for historical, political or financial reasons or otherwise. As the superintendent you bring vision and the “big picture” perspective to the table and as such set the context and tone. Having your teams think about non-negotiables ahead of task will provide focus and will save both time and resources in the long term.

Step 4: Acknowledge what works: I am a big believer in analyzing data and studying research and I relish in the fact of knowing what makes other districts successful. Take time to learn how others are addressing a similar problem and weigh the pros and cons for your own district in advance of setting your teams on course. Involving them in doing the research for this is also a useful professional development exercise. Letting them know upfront that whatever they see, hear, and learn from other schools and districts will be valuable to any initiative under consideration in your district, and that whatever you decide to do will have to be modified to “fit” your district.

Step 5: Water your roots: Every district has a mission statement or a set of guiding principles. Water these roots on a regular basis by leveraging them as a checkpoint in team meetings. In moments of conflict or uncertainty, ask if you are on track with your highest mission. Ask if you are helping or hindering reaching your goal.

Not all decisions warrant multi-level and multi-stakeholder buy-in. If you’re making an administrative decision about the type of pencils to order, disagreements will have little impact on learning outcomes! On the other hand, deciding to invest in educational intervention software is a decision that may have significant ramifications for the district as a whole, the teachers, and most importantly the students in the classroom. So let’s use that as a real example to illustrate how a facilitative approach can complement instructional leadership to achieve a multi-stakeholder consensus on the decisions that really count.

INTERVENTION ACROSS THE DISTRICT: A REAL-LIFE EXAMPLE

I was introduced to a particular literacy intervention software program in my capacity as a principal at Wade Hampton High School in our district. The program, from AutoSkill, was called the Academy of READING and we realized very strong, significant results following implementation of the program. In short this particular software helps struggling students to work independently on skill gaps. In so doing it frees educators to concentrate their time and efforts where they are needed most. The software enables students to achieve an average gain of 2.5 grade levels in reading skills after 25 hours of time on task. Those kinds of results helped transform our school into a high performing one. I later discovered that there was an equivalent program for math called the Academy of MATH. When I became superintendent I saw the need to implement a district-wide implementation of these programs, or something, in grades K to 12.

My initial goal and challenge was to get my team engaged in a discussion around the role of intervention software as an efficient teaching aid for addressing the needs of at-risk students—without bringing a prescriptive approach for the solution to the table. To do this one has to remain objective, if not neutral, about the options

for addressing the challenge while creating clear goals supported by an inspiring vision for what the immediate future could look like.

I used my monthly leadership meeting to introduce the idea of a district-wide implementation of an intervention solution for reading and math. I started by sharing my experience and the results achieved with the Academy of READING but while clearly being committed to the outcome as opposed to this particular solution. In this case my leadership team quickly agreed it was worth looking into a wider implementation of an intervention solution. This led to a decision to have representatives from AutoSkill meet with my principals and teachers to showcase the program. I wanted this to be as objective as possible despite the successes that I had experienced. I asked each principal to put together an evaluation team from their school to make sure they included representation from English Language Arts and math teachers who would be using the program—an important first step in securing stakeholder buy-in.

The preliminary evaluation was positive and culminated in a decision to schedule a planning day that would bring a team from each school together to discuss their perceptions of the intervention program and decide how to implement it in their school—realizing that implementation would look different at each individual school. It was also very important to clearly define the non-negotiables, which in this case included which students would train, what hardware would be dedicated to the effort, and how we would monitor student progress. Throughout the day every team reported out to the full group what they had decided to that point. Allowing each school team to report out at various times throughout the day assisted each team in making their respective implementation plan stronger.

At the end of the day, everyone was excited because they knew exactly what the program was about; they could see the value that would be realized for at-risk students. More importantly each team left with a customized plan for implementing it in their school—one that respected the differences between schools in terms of size, type of students and challenges, and resources to support a school-level program. They left with a plan and a willingness to support that plan with a new instructional model at the classroom and student level.

NOT ROCKET SCIENCE

Implied throughout this article is something very simple yet profound. All education professionals with some experience and who genuinely want to make a difference are capable of greatness. I truly believe that. What is required is an approach that leverages the considerable expertise, talent and energy that exists across a district. In this respect, the solution to any given problem or challenge likely exists within your team. The challenge as a superintendent is not to come up with all the ideas and a plan worked out, but rather to enroll others through a collaborative approach to decision-making. This enables the best ideas to flourish within a team setting. This approach also means identifying those individuals and teams that should be involved—the stakeholders—and introducing a plan that results in maximum involvement that is appropriate for the situation.

The outcomes can be powerful: tremendous synergy and collaboration resulting from group discovery; identification and adoption of best practices; and ultimately an excellent curriculum that meets or exceeds the state's standards by putting the needs of all students first.

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If you have a question for Dr. Pruitt or if you would like to learn more about AutoSkill intervention software please contact AutoSkill by phone at **1-800-288-6754** or email **info@autoskill.com**.