

## THE JOURNEY TO BECOMING A "LEADER OF LEADERS"

by

*Dr. Susan Williamson*

Leading change begins with being able to identify a school's current reality, the ability to articulate the changes being considered, and a firm understanding of where the school is headed. Over the past few years educational publications have identified the primary role of the principal as a strong instructional leader who has the knowledge, skills, and ability to create and sustain a supportive, professional learning organization. Where does a principal begin in his/her journey to becoming a visionary leader—someone who has the ability to guide, direct, and develop the knowledge and skills of other individuals in a professional learning community?

An instructional leader must embody the principles of life long learning. It is not enough to get a degree and assume that you have all the tools you will need to become an effective leader. In order to become a valued resource to those teaching in the classroom each day, a leader must have the willingness to read the latest research and be aware of time-tested methods, to have a thorough understanding of curriculum and instruction, and be guided by a framework for designing school wide improvement. This framework should include three important "Building Blocks for Enhancing Student Achievement": *Total Quality Principles and Tools*, the *Effective Schools Correlates*, and a *Continuous Improvement Process*. Out of these three important concepts will come the necessary understandings that will allow an instructional leader to help teachers make better use of classroom assessment data, to focus the staff on problem areas and to involve them in the process of finding appropriate solutions. Once the staff is working together in the pursuit of a solution they will become more willing to accept, and even demand professional development. An artful leader knows how to bring focus slowly enough not to overwhelm staff members, but pushes enough to take them out of their comfort zone and into a problem-solving mode.

### ***Total Quality Principles & Tools***

The first "building block" for enhancing student achievement requires a paradigm change in "the way we do business around here." The philosophy of *Total Quality* stresses the importance of studying and analyzing what is being done and constantly improving processes and products through the use of scientific methods. There is a strong focus and commitment to continuous improvement, teamwork, and the needs of the customers (parents, students, & staff). These fundamental principles stress the importance of systemic change, which takes long-term commitment, courage and risk-taking. Edward Deming, one of the leading champions of the total quality movement, has said that managers must have a profound knowledge of how their system works. Educational leaders at all levels of schooling must have the profound knowledge of how students learn and achieve at a high level. This constancy of purpose creates an environment in which everyone works together to move the school in a single direction with a long-term focus. Improvement occurs through both incremental change and

through carefully evaluated innovation. Teamwork and cooperation are encouraged so that staff members share their knowledge, ideas, and solutions in order to solve problems. Problem-solving processes and tools are understood and used by everyone in the organization to analyze, understand, and solve problems. Decisions are made on the basis of data and not opinions, assumptions, and habits.

### ***Effective Schools Correlates***

The second “building block” is the *Effective Schools Correlates* that provide a “rubric” for continuous improvement. The correlates allow us to “begin with the end in mind.” Thirty years of research bear out the basic beliefs of the Effective Schools Movement, which conclude that all children can learn and come to school motivated to do so, and that schools control enough of the variable to assure that virtually all students do learn. Ron Edmonds asserts that:

*We can, whenever and wherever we choose, successfully teach all children whose schooling is on interest to us. We already know more than we need to do that. Whether or not we do it must finally depend on how we feel about the fact that we haven't so far.*

Through a comprehensive understanding of the correlates of effective schools, principals will be able to make changes based on “not because I said so” but because “these changes will bring us closer to being an effective school with high achieving students”. Being able to articulate the characteristics of an effective school—safe & orderly environment, climate of high expectations for success, clear and focused mission based on learning for all, opportunity to learn and student time on task, frequent monitoring of student progress, positive home-school relations, and instructional leadership that focuses on creating a community of shared values—will greatly enhance a principal’s ability to provide his/her staff with powerful professional development. Staff meetings can provide time for reflection, discussion, and review of the school’s mission and vision statements. An analysis on how much time is allocated for the teaching of reading, writing, and mathematics can become a topic for discussion. Each of the correlates should be presented in a way that allows staff members the opportunity to compare their schools to what “an effective school should look like.”

### ***A Continuous Improvement Process For Increased Student Performance***

A systematic and managed process for increased student achievement is the third “building block” in the framework for school improvement. This process involves the collection, analysis, and disaggregation of data, the use of research in drawing conclusions, the development and implementation of action plans, and a constant monitoring of results. This continuous improvement cycle focuses on both student and teacher performance.

When “determining the data” the question to ask is, “What types of data will best inform improvement efforts?” The information that is collected should not only include student

academic, behavioral, and demographic data, but should also include staff assessment data. The data that is collected should be used in developing a *profile* of the school that can be used as a starting point for decision-making as well as an important source of evidence regarding current conditions. Once the data is collected and a profile has been developed, decision makers need to ask themselves, “What types of analysis will best inform improvement efforts? As the data is being disaggregated, standards and criteria need to be applied. The data should also be reported by various groupings (low income, ethnicity, etc.)

Following the data gathering and analysis phase of the continuous improvement process, conclusions need to be made based on a review and examination of the research. This is the most critical phase of the improvement process and many times is given the least consideration. “What can we influence the most that would affect student learning?” An analysis of discrepancies between what is expected & what is occurring is critical. Noted business leader Max DePree (1989) supports the value of a thorough assessment of current reality. “The first responsibility of a leader is to define reality,” he points out (p11). This needs to be done without blame or excuses. Examining best practices being used by high performing schools by the leadership teams would be an excellent professional development activity. It is also critical at this juncture that the professional development needs of the staff be taken into consideration.

Once academic focus areas are tied to student performance and are aligned with the school’s vision, mission, and beliefs, it is time to “develop the action plan.” The action plan requires professional development on how to determine specific, measurable objectives, strategies, timelines, and resources. Professional development strategies are tied to the learning objectives and included in the plan. Appropriate individuals are selected to develop & implement the plan, which is reviewed, approved, and shared with all the stakeholders.

During the “implementation” phase of the action plan, the focus is on continuous assessment, data-driven decision-making, collaborative grade level teaming focused on results, monitoring by the instructional leader, and focused job-embedded professional development that is integrated into the professional life of schools. According to Richard DuFour (2000) “Teacher isolation is so deeply ingrained in the traditional fabric of schools that leaders cannot simply invite teachers to create a collaborative culture. They must identify and implement specific, strategic interventions that help teachers work together rather than alone.” In schools committed to change, principals are helping teachers break out of the isolated confines of their classrooms and develop new relationships with colleagues. Teachers are being encouraged to watch one another teach and to learn from one another. With increased knowledge about teaching and learning, they are redefining their roles and becoming facilitators of learning as well as assessment specialists, mentors, managers, and lifelong learners. As members of their school improvement teams, they are making decisions about everything from schedules and budgets to curriculum and technology. The most promising reform efforts

recognize the value of teachers' knowledge and experience and are giving them a voice in helping lead the way to more effective schools.

Critical skills at this point of the process revolve around communication. An open, honest communication system within a school does not stand-alone but must function in concert with other attitudes of appreciation, recognition, caring, and involvement in decision-making. Such a system allows teachers to speak directly but tactfully to their colleagues and their administrators. Staff members must feel free to disagree with, and even confront, each other. At the same time there must be a commitment to discussing and resolving matters in a constructive manner and to being supportive of one another. The principal can model and monitor desired behavior as well as provide staff development in the form of communication workshops.

It is important to continually evaluate the effect of the action plan on staff practices and student learning. At any juncture of the implementation process the plan can be modified. The results of the improvement process need to be documented and shared with stakeholders, teachers, parents, students, and community members. Based on the results the plan is review/revised and the improvement process continues.

Principals must cultivate the skills associated with instructional leadership and the building of professional learning communities. According to Dennis Sparks, "Powerful professional development uses information related to student learning for various purposes. Information regarding student learning can serve several important purposes in the staff development process. The most powerful forms of professional development use such information to determine staff development goals, to guide and motivate teacher learning, to monitor the impact of staff development on achievement, and to make appropriate mid-course corrections. It also may provide evident to teachers that their changes in instructional practices are improving student learning." Principals, seeking to begin the journey toward becoming strong effective leaders, must begin with educating themselves. The "building blocks" for enhancing student achievement will provide them with the knowledge, skills, and beliefs that are necessary to provide their staffs with powerful, school embedded professional development--the key to continuous improvement.