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Rewriting the Script in Urban Schools

A Conversation with Yvette Jackson and Veronica McDermott

Deborah Perkins-Gough

We constantly hear about the poverty and other social problems that challenge urban schools. But there's another story-one of promise and progress. Yvette Jackson, chief executive officer of the National Urban Alliance, and Veronica McDermott, a regional director with the alliance, talked with *Educational Leadership* about their vision for transforming urban schools.

Read Abstract

What does the work of the National Urban Alliance show us about the kinds of change needed in urban schools?

YVETTE JACKSON: We need a new vision and belief in the students in urban schools. Right now, reform policies and mandates are putting the focus on looking for student weaknesses, so students' strengths have been ignored, and their potential for high intellectual performance has gone unnoticed.

Labeling urban schools as failures causes real stress and fear. It inhibits teachers' creativity and their ability to bring forth the potential of their students. So the most important change should be adopting a pedagogy for urban students that's like gifted education—where you design all the practices and structures with the purpose of eliciting students' potential, first identifying strengths, using the strengths to build underdeveloped skills, and then providing enrichment and opportunities for students to apply their intelligence. We call this the *pedagogy of confidence*.

We have to flip the script. When you have a strong vision that articulates belief in the capacity of students, the students go beyond minimal growth and basic literacy to actually thrive and flourish in school and out school.

What has created that focus on student deficits?

YVETTE JACKSON: The focus on weaknesses started many years ago with myths about the intelligence of students of color—that they're just not capable of doing as well. And the emphasis on "closing the gap" ha: actually perpetuated these myths. When people talk about "the gap," they're talking about a gap between races. I've literally heard people say, "Oh, those are gap children." That is just horrifying. In our work in schools, the gap we prefer to focus on is the one between students' potential and what they're actually achieving.

When Title I was passed, its goal was to bring resources to schools to enrich the lives of children who are challenged by poverty. But what happened was that schools applied for Title I funding on the basis of identifying students' weaknesses—not just poverty, but low academic performance. As a result, people started focusing on the weakness, which really wasn't the point of Title I.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) brought even more attention to weaknesses and resulted in mandated instruction that was more remedial than enriching. We've worked in schools where, after we've talked abou enrichment and high operational practices, teachers came to us and said, "But because of NCLB, we can't (these things. We have to use more remedial types of programs." Teachers begin to believe that they don't have the capacity to elicit the giftedness of students. And that feeling gets passed on to students. It's a vicious cycle that gets perpetuated by terms like *turnaround* and *low-performing schools* or *challenged schoo* When we talk about urban schools, the students and the teachers upon whom they depend, we should be referring to them as *schools of promise*.

What's wrong with the concept of school turnaround?

VERONICA MCDERMOTT: The turnaround model, unfortunately, is not a hopeful or empowering one. It suggests deficiencies. The label *turnaround school* feels like punishment. And in fact, people can turn arour 360 degrees and end up exactly where they were before.

Rather than turnaround, we work with schools to achieve transformation. We encourage schools to build c the potential that's already there. It's a metamorphosis that starts with the raw material a school possesse —the students, the community, the teachers, everyone. So it has a different flavor to it. Our bold, audaciou vision is to eliminate the crime of squandered potential. There's lots of potential in every school and every community; our work is to find out how to make that potential grow.

Turnaround can be externally driven. Someone can physically come to you and turn you around, but it doesn't mean you really want to move or go in the obligatory direction. Transformation is internally driven, and therefore it has much more power. It's something that people embrace as opposed to something they feel has been imposed on them.

Do reforms from outside have any positive role in school improvement? How can schools deal with those reforms positively?

YVETTE JACKSON: Imposed mandates can have positive effects if we direct them with the goal of developing student potential and not for punitive, marginalizing practices. One positive effect of No Child Left Behind has been to draw attention to underperformance that has happened because of a lack of resources. We could use it more positively by looking at assessments not from a punitive perspective, but as a diagnostic tool, recognizing areas of weakness as "underdeveloped" as opposed to deficits, and also using the assessment equally for identifying strengths and to direct resources where they're most needed.

Another example is the Common Core State Standards. The standards say that students should be college

and career ready, and what's beautiful is the underlying belief and assumption that all students *can* be college and career ready. That's a very positive statement. And if we use that as the guiding light, then we have to say, "Then what are the kinds of practices, strategies, opportunities that we're going to put in place in school that produce the higher levels of thinking, dispositions, and skills for learning how to learn that w enable students to thrive in college and career?"

You've said that urban students can be "school dependent." What does that mean?

YVETTE JACKSON: We know that the students who do well in schools are those who have access to enrichment. They have the kinds of tutoring and support they need, and they have opportunities to engag in explorations and deep conversations about those explorations. Well-off children are considered "well-of because they get these things outside of school. Urban children, so many of them, depend on school to gi them the enrichment, access to resources, and deep dialogue that other children get outside of school.

When teachers say to me, "You know, many of these kids don't have enrichment, or they haven't been exposed to things," I say, "Well, that's the whole purpose of school. That's why they're here."

Even in the poorest schools, there are ways to provide the kinds of enrichment that push students toward the frontier of their intelligence—for example, virtual field trips and project-based learning geared toward investigating world trends and problems that pique their interests. We want schools where children come into that building and believe that it's their oasis, where they will get the kind of education that is going to enable them to not only thrive and flourish, but also be able to contribute. They are dependent on school for that to happen.

What school practices effectively recognize and nurture student strengths?

VERONICA MCDERMOTT: One thing that some schools do is start off the year by data mining for strengths. You can do that in any number of ways. One is to actually have students write down what strengths they possess. I mean, why not ask them? You might have students do a personal self-assessment consisting of broad, positive categories: What are my interests, hobbies, talents? What ideas are important to me? What positive adjectives describe me? Then, working with another student, they compare their responses. Wher are the similarities? Where are the differences? At the end, the students report on their partner: "So I discovered some wonderful things about Wayne, and here they are." This public affirmation of one another's positive qualities creates a different atmosphere in the classroom and works wonders on everyone's psyche.

YVETTE JACKSON: Having students and teachers identify strengths is also a culturally responsive teaching strategy. First it's validating their capacity for developing strengths. Second, it's emancipating. When you ge students to identify their strengths and then ask them how they developed those strengths, it's an invitatic for them to open themselves to share their cultural references, the things they have been exposed to and participated in that have been meaningful and important to them. What people in their lives have helped them develop their strengths? What they have been exposed to? What are their deep interests?

When teachers hear students give responses to that kind of reflection, they realize, "These students can be very motivated." The teachers learn more about who these children really are, and they start thinking abou how they can build on that.

You've also emphasized that schools can make students active participants in transformation. How does that work?

YVETTE JACKSON: You start with a vision that articulates belief in the capacity and gifts of the students, the staff, and the community. Then you invite everybody to come to the table in different ways. In the schools we work with, we call it creating a "mediative learning community": that is, staff and students have equal agency, and this agency is mediated to elicit strengths, meaningful input, and a shared culture in which all are represented.

In many schools, we have students participate in professional learning experiences with teachers—particularly when they're learning about cognitive research and neuroscience. A shared language of learnir develops in which communication becomes real discourse. Teachers and students are able to sit around a table and start planning how lessons can be different; the teachers might know the content, but the students can articulate and identify the activities and connections that would help prime them to learn the information. Students learn to talk about pedagogy. They can describe to you what their needs are. The whole environment of the school changes; teachers become students, students become teachers, and the learn and teach together.

We've done that at all grade levels. We've even included students with teachers on classroom walk-through to look at student engagement. We call it the *mediative analysis process.* Students and teachers look togeth to see where students are more engaged and what's inspiring the engagement, or where they're not engaged and what's causing barriers to the engagement. And then they talk together about what they saw and ask what would be needed to get students more engaged and how they can work together as teams o students and teachers.

It's really powerful to see. It's transformative. We actually have schools where students run parent training sessions—they're learning about learning, and then they help the parents learn more about learning. That brings more parents into schools because their children are actually giving these sessions.

Changes like these require effective leadership. You've written about the importance of an urban leader acting as a *soul friend*. What does that concept mean?

VERONICA MCDERMOTT: The more I think about this notion of a soul friend, the more I recognize its power. *Soul,* of course, is the heart of things—touching the inner spirit. And a *friend* is somebody who's on an equi plane. A relationship with a soul friend is not a power relationship; there are elements of trust and working together.

We've all worked with somebody who has an ability to capture and name what's really going on and to get people to see things differently. That's what a soul friend does. A soul friend looks around and says, "Hmm organizationally, here's where we are." They affirm the reality, but they do it in a nonjudgmental way that invites people to say, "You know what? You may be on to something." That begins a process of transformation—of people looking at themselves, looking at their organization, and saying, "We can do better. We can build on what we have. What we've done up until now is not working."

Sometimes that's a difficult thing to say. But a soul friend can get people to say that without feeling threatened, challenged, or punished. It's the ability to have a trusting relationship and an open and honest discussion.

We worked closely with one principal in Bridgeport, Connecticut—a deep pocket of poverty in one of the richest states in the nation and in one of the richest counties within that state. This new principal came into a school that had been labeled in need of improvement years before No Child Left Behind was enacted. Sc

this school was suffering from a very bad reputation.

She embodies what it means to be a soul friend. She looked at the school with a different set of eyes and said, "Wait a minute, there's another story going on here. And we can change this. Our kids can do this. You as teachers can do it." And then she put in the structures and the supports that allowed people to use the strengths that were there.

A concrete example: The school had a large number of Spanish-speaking students. Most of the faculty did not speak a word of Spanish. Therefore, most school events were not welcoming for the parents because the teachers couldn't communicate. But the kids possessed a strength—they knew how to speak Spanish. So the school started using the students as docents during curriculum fairs, to explain the instructional practices that were guiding the school. That's a very empowering thing for students—to be standing side b side with their teachers explaining a display of their work for the past month. Think of the vocabulary that the students had to develop to do that in an intelligent, deep way!

In essence, the principal said, "Rather than looking at their second language as a deficit, let's look at it as a strength. How can we bring the entire community into dialogue over what we're doing in a way that's warn and welcoming and nonthreatening?" As a result, more and more parents came to events.

In short, there are two aspects of being a soul friend. One is to clearly see and articulate the current reality again, in a way that's nonjudgmental. And the other part of it is to recognize and affirm people's interests and abilities. You make the assets that exist visible and clear, and you build from there. That's a whole different orientation from the deficit model.

Sometimes the most difficult part of leadership is just getting out of the way. Why is that importan

VERONICA MCDERMOTT: When I'm working with leaders, and for me that means both administrators and teachers, I often share the results of a Gallup Poll that was done a number of years ago on what American: think of leadership. It's always an eye opener.

One of the questions the poll explored was, When you're allowed to use your strengths in your work, what percentage of time are you on task, as opposed to when you're given something to do that doesn't use you strengths? The numbers are significant. Respondents say that they're on task 73 percent of the time if they're working at what they're good at, and only 9 percent of the time when they're not using their strengths. To me, that becomes a clarion call to find out what people's strengths are and to give them the freedom to use those strengths.

Another poll question asked what qualities people want in their leaders. People are always amazed at the response. It's not organizational skills. It's not knowledge. The first item is trust. The second item is compassion. And the next two are stability and hope. If you put these elements together, it suggests that what most of us want from leaders is to make way for us to reach our own potential—to develop our strengths and skills to the utmost in a positive environment. I think the exact same thing goes on in the heads of students. They're looking for the same environment in which to work.

The problem is that a lot of our leadership training suggests other qualities as being more important. For instance, being "data-driven." Yes, data's important. But it's not where I would start if I were trying to transform a school, unless I was smart enough to enlarge the notion of data and say, "What are the data I'm going to look at?" Not the data that show people everything they're not good at, but the data that remind people what they *are* good at.

The metaphors that have been used to define leaders have limited our ability to tap into the promise and potential that exist among our staff and students and community, to build a school community that is reflective and responsive to the potential that exists.

How can school leaders strike a balance between strong leadership and collaborative leadership?

YVETTE JACKSON: We believe that strong leadership *is* collaborative. If you recognize that leadership is abou inspiring and guiding others and you feel competent in your ability to inspire others, you articulate belief ir their commitment and ability. Staff responds positively to this vision, so you then feel confident in sharing the leadership to achieve that vision.

As a leader, your strength comes from helping others find their strengths. It's like adding drops of rain to a pond. Every drop increases the volume of that pond. And every drop of strength that people bring to the school expands what the leader is capable of achieving.

Teachers often don't even know what the other teachers in the school are good at. When school leaders identify the strengths of others, they give staff opportunities to take on different kinds of responsibilities. [teachers have a talent for the arts, or a particular passion like photography or sports? Often they don't get chance to share that, yet offering enrichment classes to students in those areas could be crucial.

As the appointed leader, you have particular responsibilities for making sure the school is safe and is moving in the right direction. But by sharing that responsibility and looking for the gifts within your students, your staff, and the community, you will have the human capital to make your vision a reality.

You also write that urban school leaders must choose whether to be fearful or fearless. Why would some educators choose to be fearful? What empowers some to be fearless?

VERONICA MCDERMOTT: Many educators, particularly in recent years, are almost forced to live in fear as a result of the narrative around what's happening in their schools. You can walk into certain buildings and absolutely feel the fear. Because there's so much at stake, people feel that they're not in a position to spea out, even if they don't believe that the policies are good for students. They're put into a trap of powerlessness.
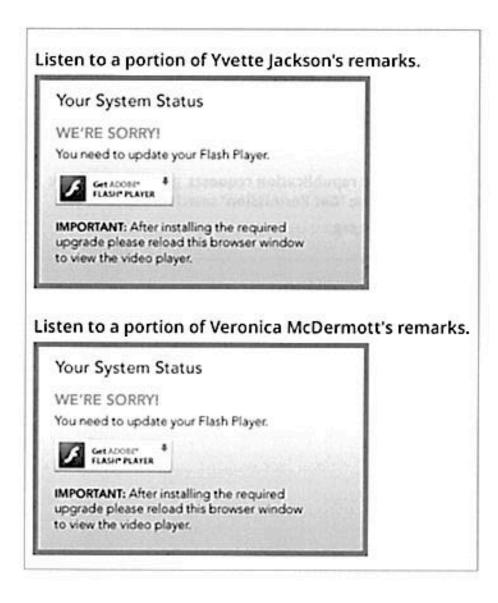
If you are a young educator, whether an administrator or a teacher, and your entire future depends on policies and practices and tests that you have very little control over, that can be spirit-killing. Most people go into education because they believe they can contribute something positive to the lives of students and to society. And instead, they're put into a straitjacket and constantly being denigrated. They're constantly under pressure. We know what pressure and fear do to creativity, to the way the brain functions. They shu everything down.

So what empowers some educators to be fearless? I think for many people, it starts from an inner moral compass they possess. They know something is wrong. They have this nagging sense that things are going awry. But oftentimes they need a catalyst to propel them to push back and say, "No, this is not good for kic This is not good for learning. This is not the environment that I want to be part of. It's not the culture to which I want to contribute."

Sometimes that catalyst is a conversation. Sometimes it comes from attending a conference. Sometimes it comes from an article. Sometimes it comes from a book. But it takes a concerted effort for people to recall what propelled them to go into this profession and then to have the courage to say, "We can do this a bett

way."

It takes a strong sense of self. And it takes the capacity to say, "I can't do it alone. I need to have allies in the field. We need to work together to resolve the situation." Teachers can practice this kind of leadership in their own classrooms. Principals can do it in their buildings. We've worked with superintendents who've made this their vision for their entire school district. But it takes a lot of courage driven by a sense of fearlessness.

Listen to a portion of Yvette Jackson's remarks.

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Yvette Jackson, chief executive officer of the National Urban Alliance (NUA), has spent her career working to recognize and support the learning potential of urban students. She was formerly director of gifted programs and executive director of instruction and professional development for the New York City school Veronica McDermott, a regional director of NUA, has been a superintendent of schools, assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, principal, district director, dean, and teacher. They are

coauthors of *Aim High, Achieve More: How to Transform Urban Schools Through Fearless Leadership* (ASCD, 2012) and the forthcoming book *Unleashing Student Potential: How Do I Identify and Activate Student Strength* (ASCD, 2015). **Deborah Perkins-Gough** is senior editor of *Educational Leadership*.

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When Students Drive Improvement

Eric Hardie

Here's how to tap the single greatest resource in a school.

Why are so many school improvement efforts doomed to failure? We've blamed many factors over the years: poorly run professional development, staff resistance, flavor-of-the-month changes in direction that inhibit teacher buy-in, and too-frequent changes in school administration, to name a few.

But what if the real secret to school improvement has been right in front of us the whole time? What if the "secret" isn't a secret at all, but simply the need to tap into the single biggest, most underused source of creativity, collaboration, leadership, and informed problem solving in any school—the students themselves?

Read Abstract

Where Schools Fall Short

Schools are in trouble. The longer students spend in school, the less engaged they are. Current research from Gallup indicates that although elementary school students are generally interested in school (76 percent), this number drops to 61 percent in middle school and to an abysmal 44 percent in high school (Busteed, 2013). This raises important questions about what students should be learning, how they might engage with learning, and what input they should have into their learning and their schools.

So what should students be learning? Tony Wagner (2008), of Harvard University's Innovation Lab, conclud that to succeed in the 21st century, students require "survival skills" in the following areas: critical thinking and problem solving, collaboration across networks and leading by influence, agility and adaptability, initiative and entrepreneurship, effective oral and written communication, ability to access and analyze information, and curiosity and imagination. Most classrooms and schools provide little opportunity to lean and practice these skills.

As for student engagement, in his book *Drive*, Daniel Pink (2009) concludes that the three factors that

motivate people are autonomy, mastery, and purpose. These factors are in short supply in a traditional classroom, which mostly relies on the external reward of grades to motivate learning, often unsuccessfully

Finally, addressing the issue of student input, Adam Fletcher (2005) notes that students typically are offere "token" levels of participation in school rather than truly authentic ones. In his "ladder of student involvement," the highest rungs involve students making decisions and acting as real partners with adults.

What Wagner, Pink, and Fletcher propose looks starkly different from what the traditional school structure generally offers. So how do we create a school context in which students are learning the skills they need f the new world of work, are motivated, and are true partners in decision making?

The fact is, real school improvement doesn't require complicated theoretical approaches or copious resources. All schools have the resources required—they just need to start *really* listening to their students and create opportunities for students to take the lead.

What One School Found

For the past several years, students at Almonte District High School in Ontario, Canada, were asked to complete a survey to provide feedback about their involvement, interest level, homework habits, and sens of belonging at school. The school, which serves about 550 students in grades 7–12, is located just 10 minutes from my own school. The survey provided interesting information, but the staff struggled with wh to do with the results.

To change this, the school's principal, Ron Ferguson, challenged a few members of the student council to find someone completely different from them—to ensure that the group had broad representation—and t bring those students to a series of lunchtime meetings. When the students arrived, Ferguson distributed copies of the survey and asked them to find a problem and come up with a solution.

Over the course of three lunch hours, the students ate pizza and collaborated with one another as they discussed the survey and school. Here's what they came up with:

> Too many students feel bullied at school.
>
> To prevent bullying, students need to feel a greater sense of belonging. Bullies will bully less and victims will be more resilient if everyone feels like part of a larger community.
>
> To ensure a sense of belonging, the school should launch a system in which everyone belongs to a house and competes as a house against other houses for points. There should be a wide range of competitions so everyone has a chance to represent his or her house and win points for it. To promo individual accountability, a house should lose points if any of its members skip class and should gain points if any of its members have shown real improvement in class (which doesn't necessarily mean earning the highest marks).
>
> To keep things interesting, if a house wins one month, it should have access to a house lounge that h comfortable seating, technology, and a refrigerator with water and juice in it. When members of the house hang out in the same area, house bonds will deepen.

The principal was impressed. He invited the students to share their plan with the rest of the staff, who wer equally complimentary. Everyone acknowledged that the students had come up with a plan that was more

detailed and thoughtful than any plan the adults might have proposed and that it was more likely to succeed because it came from the students themselves.

The students ran the house system successfully for a semester, but then decided to focus more specifically on issues of equity and inclusion under the bullying umbrella. They have since started to work on issues of gender equality—for example, addressing how much schools spend on boys' and girls' sports respectively. What they've retained in the transition is a sense of empowerment and the knowledge that they can bring about positive change in their school.

Bringing It Home

Intrigued by their results, I ran the same process at my own school, Carleton Place High School, which is located just outside the city of Ottawa and serves approximately 800 students in grades 7–12. Students we initially selected by our student council co-chairs who, like the students at Almonte, were challenged to assemble a diverse group. The resulting group of 15 students from grades 8–11 included academically oriented kids, athletes, artists, and those only mildly engaged in school.

Over the course of several meetings, the students focused on the key words *relevance, technology, trust, truancy,* and *school spirit.* I charged them to come up with a plan that would address these issues. Their feedback looked something like this:

> School isn't relevant because it's not connected to the world around it. This lowers student engagement and school spirit.
>
> Many students have no idea what they want to do when they finish school. They need to be exposed more professions, activities, and ideas from the community.
>
> Students who skip class regularly would be less likely to do so if they felt really connected to the scho for at least part of the day.
>
> The school should offer a series of practical extracurricular courses on a wide range of topics—from gardening to computer game development to baking to charity event planning. This way, students could try out a variety of activities that might help them discover areas of interest to pursue.
>
> The project should be called Bear University (the bear is the school mascot) to help promote the idea of postsecondary education to all students and, most particularly, to encourage those who aren't currently thinking about attending a college or university.
>
> All students and staff should be allowed to sign up for courses. Courses could be run by staff, studen or outside experts. If a teacher wanted to take the course, he or she could act as both supervisor and participant. Having students and teachers learning together would promote a love of learning throughout the school.
>
> The school should offer practical one-off courses—on how to do taxes, save for school, or get car insurance—under the title of Life 101 because students want to know how to do these things.
>
> On course completion, participants should receive certificates (to help with résumé building) and public recognition (to promote school spirit and inclusion). It's difficult for students to write a résumé when they have no experience, so including the certificates would help.
>
> Teachers could connect work done in Bear University to their own course content. The two learning opportunities playing off each other would create more engagement and relevance schoolwide.

Students were invited to share the plan with staff members, who were deeply impressed with its thoughtfulness and flexibility. They also acknowledged that the plan addressed *all* the students' concerns, which was no small feat.

The resulting courses that students organized—on topics as diverse as photography, costuming, cake decorating, and law enforcement—were a great success and saw excellent participation because they focused on students' areas of real interest and gave students insights into a variety of possible careers. In many cases, we brought in experts to teach the courses, which lent them an air of legitimacy. For example, two photographers from the Associated Press taught the photography course. Teachers participated as fellow learners, enjoying the opportunity to become students again.

The experience of change leadership was clearly a positive one for students in both schools. The students were genuinely involved in school leadership, as Fletcher advocates; they were engaged in the meaningful practice of Wagner's survival skills; and they were highly motivated because they had the autonomy and purpose that Pink describes. As a result, the students poured countless hours of energy and ideas into making the project a success.

How to Get Started

When given the opportunity, students will come up with solutions that are both insightful and practical and that solve multiple issues rather than just one. Here are some guidelines on getting started:

> Form a representative group of students. Don't just involve those who would normally volunteer. School works for certain students, but not for others—and it's often the students for whom school *doesn't* work who provide the most valuable insights. Because these students are less likely to volunteer, you'll probably have to recruit them. As one student observed, "We *all* have ideas. We just have to bring them out."
>
> Start by having the students look at a recent schoolwide student survey. Students won't necessarily interpret the data the same way the adults in the building will, which is, in itself, insightful.
>
> Leave the task of coming up with solutions open-ended, with minimal restrictive criteria (beyond what's required to make the idea safe and doable). With too many criteria, the exercise devolves into the tokenism that Fletcher refers to. As one student noted, having a blank slate was important becau "there was nothing to limit us."
>
> Start from a position of trust. Students will come up with valuable solutions to school problems if you give them the time and autonomy. Trust encourages students to take the task seriously and do a goo job.

Beyond Guesswork

So many school improvement initiatives fail and so many dollars are wasted every year because the adults in the school are always guessing at what might work for students.

Why guess? Just ask your students. They'll develop plans they *know* will work.

Whose School Is This Anyway?

As you think about the role that student participation plays in your school, consider these questions:

How much input do students have into the school improvement plan?

What percentage of the school building is available for students to use for innovating, collaborating, and leading?

How frequently are students invited to participate in staff meetings and professional development in which the topic is increasing student learning and school improvement?

What percentage of the school budget is committed to student-led initiatives that are aligned with the school improvement plan that students helped develop?

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Getting Unstuck

Bryan Goodwin

Top-down leadership can get things started, but to keep improvement moving forward, schools need to work from the inside out.

As a kid, I spent many summer afternoons riding in the back of my grandpa's Ford pickup on his farm. The farm was located in a flood plain in Iowa, which made for rich soil and muddy driving. Ostensibly, our purpose was usually to go fishing, or more vaguely, to "check something out." But my mother suspected another motive: to see if we could get stuck—and unstuck—in the mud. Usually, turning the wheel to a new angle and hitting the gas would do the trick. The truck would fishtail and then lurch out of the dip in which it was stuck. Sometimes, though, cranking the wheel and gunning the engine only made things worse, sinking us deeper into the mud.

Read Abstract

In a way, education in the United States seems to be stuck in a similar rut. We're hitting the gas harder and harder on approaches that worked in the past, but we're spinning our tires.

Getting Started, Then Getting Stuck

By now, we're probably all familiar with the phenomenon of the *implementation dip*, a term coined by Michael Fullan (2001) to describe the slump in performance that often occurs when innovations require ne knowledge and skills.

Fullan and others have told us a lot about what leaders need to do to overcome implementation dips, including

Maintaining focus and urgency to quash any this-too-shall-pass syndrome.
Monitoring implementation to avoid backsliding into familiar (yet inferior) practices.
Listening to naysayers and, as appropriate, incorporate their ideas into change efforts.

Working in teams to buck one another up when the going gets tough.

Much like revving the engine and cranking the wheel to get a truck out of a dip in a cornfield, these strategies work well … until they don't anymore. Researchers have found that schools often do what it take to overcome initial difficulties, achieve results for a while, but then find themselves stuck in a rut:

In Virginia, many so-called turnaround schools improved for three years, then hit a performance plateau (Hochbein, 2012).

In Texas, test-based accountability drove performance gains for a while, but results then leveled off (Schneider, 2011).

In 25 states, testing pressure created initial gains before student performance plateaued and decline (Nichols, Glass, & Berliner, 2012).

Worldwide, education systems show a "pattern of a steep rise followed by a plateau," likely because "once the 'easy wins' have been achieved in classroom instruction, further improvements take longer to embed and are harder to achieve" (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010, p. 50).

Schools are not alone. Plateau effects are common in many endeavors—from exercise to the arts to business (Sullivan & Thompson, 2013). In exercise, the recommended treatment is to switch up one's routine. In business, the treatment is much the same. Business coach Bill Bishop (2010) says that compani typically hit a performance plateau when they stop improving their products because they believe they've found that one right way to do things. Similarly, Jim Collins (2009) has observed that one of the first signs o trouble among declining companies is that they "lose sight of the true underlying factors that created success in the first place" (p. 21). In short, they believe they were successful because they did certain specif things, but they've never built an understanding of why these things worked—or, more important, the conditions under which they would no longer work.

Adopt, Then Adapt

Schools and districts often demonstrate the same myopia when they hit performance plateaus. There's a tendency to double down on what they've been doing—tightening the screws to get everyone to follow the prescribed program to a T. Or maybe they patch the first program by layering a second program on top of

The trouble with these responses is that they both view the problem as what Heifetz and Laurie (1997) call technical problem—something for which we assume there's an existing solution. To solve a technical problem, we just need to find the solution and implement it well. However, performance plateaus may rea be caused by adaptive challenges, which cannot be as easily identified or solved with neatly packaged solutions. Adaptive challenges require changes in beliefs, roles, and approaches to work. They demand collaboration, creativity, and experimentation—in a word, innovation.

In her profiles of high-poverty, high-performing schools, Karin Chenoweth (2007) observed that many of these schools achieved quick wins by adopting prepackaged curriculums, such as America's Choice, Succes for All, Everyday Math, Open Court, or Core Knowledge. Which program they chose seemed to be less important than the fact that they picked one and implemented it faithfully throughout the school. Once th school was able to get everyone on the same page, achievement soon rose.

However, within a few years of adopting the curriculum, most schools saw that it wasn't a perfect fit. Instea of dropping the program or simply forging ahead, high-performing schools began to adapt it to align with student needs. Unlike failed companies, they weren't wed to the specific program that led to their early success. Instead, they understood the principles underlying their success—for example, the importance of having a consistent and aligned curriculum. And because they remained focused on the needs of their customers (that is, students), they saw the need to develop a version 2.0 of their new curriculum.

Elements of Inside-Out Improvement

Making this shift is not always easy. Often, powering through initial implementation dips requires top-dow direction from a leader who assigns roles, monitors performance, and holds people accountable. Sure, the leader listens to others' concerns, but he or she knows what needs to be done. Research suggests that this style of leadership can, in fact, be effective—when the improvement strategy is straightforward (Goodwin, 2015).

However, when schools face thornier challenges in which the way ahead is less clear, they need to find a different approach—one that drives improvement not from the top down, but from the inside out. The following elements are characteristic of inside-out school improvement.

Deep Understanding of the Problem

Carnegie Foundation researchers note that educators are prone to *solutionitis*, or "the propensity to jump quickly on a solution before fully understanding the exact problem to be solved" (Bryk, Gomez, Grunow, & LeMahieu, 2015, p. 24). Real solutions, they note, come from better insight. For example, when Proctor anc Gamble wanted to develop a new product for mopping floors, the company did not simply formulate a better soap. Instead, product developers visited homes and conducted detailed observations of how peop mopped their floors. They gained a thorough understanding of the physical challenges, and even the psychology, of floor mopping. Then they took that deeper understanding and invented the Swiffer (West, 2014).

In the same way, schools can benefit from looking more closely at a problem before plugging in a solution. For example, in 2011, Austin Independent School District in Texas teamed up with researchers from Harval and the Carnegie Foundation to gain a deeper understanding of a problem that seemed intractable: high rates of teachers, especially new ones, leaving the district. The obvious place to focus efforts to fix this problem—improving hiring and placement practices—was off-limits, largely because this solution would require time-consuming changes in collective bargaining agreements and district policies. This obstacle wa actually serendipitous, because it forced the research team to look deeper. Through careful thought and analysis, the research team surfaced another driver of teacher retention that seemed so obvious it had be overlooked: principals giving frequent feedback to new teachers (Bryk et al., 2015).

Rapid-Cycle Improvement

Paralysis by analysis can keep many good ideas from ever leaving the drawing board. That's why Silicon Valley designers have learned to develop minimally viable products, test them with real people, and then

improve them before launching them more widely. In schools, this might entail designing a novel approach —say, combining project-based learning with reciprocal teaching—studying its effects over a few weeks, improving it, studying the improved version, and continuing in ongoing, iterative cycles.

In Austin, the team working on principal feedback faced another serendipitous challenge: The start of the school year was rapidly approaching, so the customary district process of spending countless meetings to develop a new protocol for principal feedback wasn't an option. An experienced principal working on the team listened to the group's brainstormed ideas and then jotted down six prompts to guide principal-teacher conversations (creating a minimally viable product). He tried the prompts out in an on-the-spot conversation with a second-year teacher working on the team. The group listened to the conversation and offered some tweaks. Over the next few days, the prompts were tried and tweaked further. Soon, all the principals on the team were using the prompts with their teachers. As more data rolled in, the team fleshed out a process for supporting teachers following the conversation and added a technology platform. The practice of providing principal feedback to teachers in addition to their formal evaluations spread districtwide (Bryk et al., 2015).

Peer Observation and Coaching

Deep instructional change requires more than training teachers in the new curriculum and setting them free to implement it. Teachers need support and feedback as they transfer new ideas into practice. Coaching can be top-down (coach to teacher), but it's usually more powerful when it's reciprocal (teacher to teacher).

Joyce, Hopkins, and Calhoun (2014) found that for professional development practices to produce long-lasting and significant change, peer coaching duos or triads must take what they learned in training sessions, apply it in classrooms, and collaboratively study student response and student learning. They assert that "everybody, from the leaders to paraprofessionals, needs to engage in continuous action research that links PD content to the study of implementation, engagement in problem solving, and the study of student response (learning) in the short and long term" (p. 10).

In Melbourne, Australia, reformers used all three of these elements to improve math and reading achievement, as well as to foster student curiosity. First, they used instructional rounds to discern the best practices of effective teachers and then codify those practices into a new teaching framework. Next, they grouped teachers into peer-coaching triads that used six-week cycles to apply, study, and improve on the practices in their classrooms. The result? Student scores on the Australian national exam rose significantly across the 80,000-student region (Hopkins & Craig, 2011).

Getting Unstuck

When my grandpa's truck got truly stuck, we had two options: (1) concede defeat and seek an outside solution (that is, walk back to the farmhouse to fetch the tractor), or (2) rely on our wits and collaboration (find a nearby branch to wedge under the tires and push together on the truck). But really, there was only one option. No one ever walked back to the farmhouse.

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