What can be the promise of public schools and how does or should educational change bring us closer to such schooling?

Public education in the United States is a radical proposition: the explicit goal is that every child has equal access to high levels of instruction, learning, and achievement. This radical proposition was established relatively recently in the history of American schooling through the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation (2002). Though rife with faults and unrealistic expectations, NCLB has had a profound impact on public schooling in America, and continues to affect the daily educational experiences of school leaders, teachers, and students across our nation.

What has become increasingly obvious, however, is that such a goal can only be attained in the context of profound changes made in a system of public education for all by educators fully equipped to address the challenge.

Some of the most important changes that resulted from NCLB (2002) include the careful design and implementation of a wide variety of systems of assessment and support for student learning, establishing a much higher level of accountability for what actually occurs on a daily basis in the classroom. Leaders of change in U.S. schools must more fully understand and carefully nurture such initiatives.

Leaders of educational change must start by coming to an understanding of the critical importance of shared mission, vision, values, and goals (MVVG), fully adopted and passionately owned by all school stakeholders, coalescing exclusively around high levels of student learning. Educators must adjust focus away from what has been taught or covered by teachers, toward a much clearer and more intense...
commitment to what students are actually learning in school and how students can demonstrate that learning in meaningful ways. School leaders who neglect the importance of focused and widely shared MVVG within their schools will continue to be frustrated by student achievement that reflects more upon the context in which students live (i.e., socio-economic status, level of parents’ education) than achievement that is the result of focused and tenacious efforts to support student learning.

Public schooling in the United States is a radical proposition, indeed, but only if educators can agree that the focus of their efforts is student learning.

How do systems of values and shared goals relate to professional learning communities for school improvement? Are they dependent? And what are some examples that show how these are harnessed to educational change?

The Professional Learning Communities (PLC) model, introduced by DuFour and Eaker (1998) nearly 20 years ago, is perhaps the most promising model for school improvement (see also DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2008). While this model has seen widespread popularity in the community of practice, results in schools in the implementation of this model, and in increasing student learning, remain tepid. This is due primarily to a lack of deep understanding on the part of educational leaders and teachers of what the model actually advocates.

Within the PLC model, the four pillars upon which educational change stands are the collaborative development and ownership of individual school MVVG statements. School mission statements have been widely adopted, with vision statements following closely behind. The thoughtful development and adoption of shared values, however, remain almost entirely ignored by school leaders. The reason these foundational statements have been ineffective in producing high levels of learning for all students lies in the fact that mission and vision statements are often handed down from the district level or are developed by a small group of individuals within the school. Mission and vision statements that are not deliberately and collaboratively developed and owned by the entire school faculty remain perfunctory and fail to wield the power they promise in the daily practice of educators.

Shared value statements, also called collective commitments, are rarely developed. Those that are frequently assert vague platitudes rather than specific statements of observable behavioral commitments to which the entire faculty is accountable. An example may be when a faculty adopts a values statement that their school should be characterized by excellent instruction. I argue that a school faculty should articulate a series of related behavioral commitments to demonstrate excellent instruction such as:

(a) the development and implementation of thorough daily lesson plans,
(b) the frequent and competent collection and analysis of data, and
(c) the direct application of such analyses in daily instruction and action planning to improve student learning.

By extending value statements into observable behaviors, changes in daily practice are facilitated and accountability for making such behavioral changes shifts from the individual teacher, or school leaders, directly to the entire school community, all of whom shared a part in developing the commitments.

Shared learning goals, particularly goals to increase student performance on standardized tests, have become ubiquitous in the continuous improvement planning required in nearly all schools since the advent of NCLB (2002). However, the development and adoption of a goal statement is a very different proposition from agreeing upon the mission of the school, owning the vision of where that school should be in the future, and deeply committing oneself to shared values in one's daily practice. Understanding, developing, and owning individual school mission, vision, and values statements is prerequisite to writing and achieving learning goals for all students. It is within this process of articulating and committing to these statements that the motivation for effecting meaningful change through the PLC model is fully realized.

What are some lessons we can learn from educational change from your context?

One of the lessons I learned as a (post-NCLB) school principal was the incredible power that results from developing strong school foundational statements as I described above. Though this process was time-consuming and occasionally arduous, our school community was careful to give all stakeholders a voice in the process. We adopted foundational statements only after the entire school faculty, students, and other stakeholders had a chance to participate in the process and to fully support, if not entirely agree, with each statement.

Regarding shared purpose, well-crafted MVVG statements provided a powerful engine to pull all the pieces together and set the train running down a single track. In my research, I have found that when I have asked educators to state their understanding of the purpose of schooling, responses vary widely (Gurley, Peters, Collins, & Fifolt, 2014). Such a broad range of responses seems to indicate that individuals in schools work toward many, often conflicting, ends. Drawing from my own experience as a school leader, when stakeholders agree that the purpose of schooling is to achieve high levels of learning for each student, educators are able to tell a new story of that individual school. When everyone agrees that the purpose of schooling is for students to master the identified curriculum, all of the various endeavors that comprise the daily activities in the school coalesce around that purpose.

Next, well-crafted MVVG statements resulted in a common accountability for daily educational, professional practice. I found this to be particularly compelling regarding shared values statements, or collective commitments. When the entire
school community has agreed upon how to behave in order to reach the shared vision and accomplish the school mission, educators naturally become accountable, not only to those individuals in positions of formal authority, but much more importantly to one another. When educators allow themselves to become accountable to one another, a much more professional tone emerges. As a school leader in this context, I found it much easier to approach and address any less-than-ideal practices and behaviors from educators because I had the full force and commitment of the community behind me in dealing with such matters with individual professionals. In essence, I candidly held them accountable, not to me as the leader, but to the collective commitments they themselves had made to one another.

Finally, well-crafted MVVG statements resulted in a clear and purposeful common focus. It was only after all members of the community committed themselves to students learning that this focus began to emerge. These statements were revisited during all faculty meetings, all data and problem-solving team meetings, and were embedded in each email. We often recited these statements together for additional reinforcement. This practice solidified our commitments to students and to one another, providing a shared focus that had not been present before. Educators’ efforts and daily practices were purpose-driven and resulted in much greater focus, not on what the teachers were doing to teach the curriculum, but rather on what each student was actually learning. Classroom interventions to remediate and to extend learning became much more robust. And, the monitoring of progress toward the end of student learning became much more important and meaningful to the entire community. This type of shared focus on student learning transformed our daily practice into much more than simply a job we were there to perform. Student learning became a moral and ethical mandate, which each educator fully owned.

What are key needs of young people today? How can educational change be prioritized to meet these needs?

In many important ways, young people today are no different than other generations in terms of their need to master and apply basic skills. Young people still need to learn how to think critically and to apply their learning in many different and authentic settings. The key difference I see today is the number of distractions that impinge on student and faculty lives, drawing their focus away from the purpose of schooling. In response to these distractions, the entire educational enterprise will require a much more intense and informed focus on the purpose and process of schooling.

Educators have a mandate to insure that each child is learning at the highest possible level. A deep understanding, strong focus on, and precise alignment of curriculum, instruction, and assessment are required to meet that challenge. In terms of priorities, first, this will require educational leaders to develop a much better understanding of the curriculum. They must then guide faculty
members in a careful and coherent development of an assessment system that will accurately measure student progress in mastering the curriculum. Next will come leadership for explicit instructional planning and delivery, along with careful and frequent progress monitoring. Leaders, and specifically school principals, must take the lead in all of these processes.

Unfortunately, in the past, our nation charged school leaders with management of schools, rather than instructional leadership. The vestiges of this model remain today. Consequently, many school leaders do not understand these processes, and are therefore uninvolved, and often completely overwhelmed, with the prospect of providing the necessary leadership in curriculum, instruction, and assessment. Often school leaders, who are overinvolved in daily management concerns, claim that they simply do not have time to involve themselves in intense instructional leadership of the type I am describing. Many do their very best to meet minimal expectations for teacher observation and evaluation, arguing that there simply is not enough time in their day to provide expert instructional leadership. To this argument I reply, How do you possibly have time to not provide such leadership?

Young people today need more expert school leaders; more focused school teachers; and more coherent curriculum, instruction, and assessment processes. Young people today need educators who understand this, who are willing to accept this challenge, and train themselves to rise to the demand. Educators today need to create more coherent processes, focus on better instructional leadership practices, and commit to delivering a better product. This will not happen if we continue doing what we have always done.

What are the most important educational change issues today? What excites you about educational change today?

There have been many changes in education in the last several decades that show promise. The most important of these has been the clarion call for educators in the United States to become more accountable to themselves and to the public. We are now placing much more emphasis on collecting and attending to data and to making meaning of these data to inform the daily practice of school leaders and teachers. In response to this call, the essence (if not the current implementation) of the Professional Learning Communities model is also a very promising development.

One of the most exciting, recent changes in U.S. education that I have noted has been the articulation of Data-Driven Instruction (Bambrick-Santoyo, 2010, 2012; Uncommon Schools, 2017). Bambrick-Santoyo (2010, 2012) has contributed much to the enterprise of educational change by researching and presenting stories and practices of schools throughout the nation, many situated in highly challenging, urban settings, that have met with great success in achieving high levels of learning for their students. These schools have fully embraced the principles of Professional Learning Communities, incorporating effective
practices for supporting instructional improvement and student learning. The most impactful practices among these are weekly, 15-minute classroom observations conducted by instructional leaders, followed by weekly 15-minute sessions wherein leaders give teachers specific and meaningful feedback regarding their instruction. Other successful practices include a strong focus on the analysis of student learning data, which translates to specific plans of action, which teachers are expected to implement immediately. These schools also emphasize the development and constant nurturing of a learning-centered culture throughout the school, evidenced by students and staff members, alike. A learning culture is developed through the process of identifying specific cultural goals, articulating specific cultural values, followed by listing explicit and observable behavioral commitments made by each school stakeholder as to how to enact the desired culture on a daily basis. The results reported by these schools are impressive and sustained, calling into question the status quo of how we traditionally run schools in our nation. Teachers who are observed and provided with feedback weekly regarding their practice, and who are held accountable for improving their practice on a weekly basis, stand a much better chance at improving and developing their craft, and at a much more rapid pace, than do those who are visited only two or three times per year. In these schools, better instructional practice results in increased levels of student learning.

Some related and very promising changes are also taking root in our educational system. Among these are such initiatives as the Response to Intervention model (see www.rtinetwork.org) and the Positive Behavior Intervention & Support (see www.pbis.org) systems. These data-informed models facilitate a much higher level of accountability on the part of educators, and show great potential for actually making a difference in student learning and overall school experiences.

School leaders who understand the power of shared school MVVG statements, and who establish and maintain a clear and sustained focus on student learning will continue to experience success. It will only be when educators, not legislators, begin to own the educational profession, and to develop the expertise to design, deliver, and monitor the very best curriculum, instruction, and assessment systems in every school, that we will begin to see the type of improvement and change in student learning we wish to see. Educators who understand this, and who understand the power that shared purpose can bring, will become true innovators and enact much needed changes in our schooling process.

References


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