

THE LEARNING Principal

FOR A DYNAMIC COMMUNITY OF SCHOOL LEADERS ENSURING SUCCESS FOR ALL STUDENTS

Charting a new course

A school at the brink finds the path to success

BY JOAN RICHARDSON

In the spring of 2000, Broad Acres Elementary School in suburban Washington, D.C., received some grim news: Only 13% of its 3rd graders were proficient in reading and only 5% were proficient in math. The low test results meant Broad Acres had to improve or face the prospect of being “reconstituted” and being the first school in Maryland to be taken over by the state.

The bad news sent a shock through the system that resulted in an extensive and dramatic turnaround at the high-poverty school. Four years later, 75% of Broad Acres 3rd graders were proficient in reading and 67% proficient in math. The school was removed from the threatened list in 2004. In the process of reforming itself, Broad Acres also became the home of the Maryland Teacher of the Year for 2004, a finalist for the Maryland Teacher of the Year for 2005, and five National Board Certified Teachers.

“Broad Acres is a model of how real

education reform should be occurring, instead of how it currently is being done,” said Bonnie Cullison, president of the Montgomery County Education Association, which represents the Broad Acres staff.

One of the crucial elements that enabled the school to improve dramatically was the collaborative leadership among the district, the principal, and the union president. Coupled with that was a sea change in the understanding and push for professional development for teachers, both at the district level and within the school.

Although the teachers’ contract included language that said the union would participate if a Montgomery County school was at risk, union leader Cullison credits Supt. Jerry Weast for ensuring that it happened at Broad Acres. “When the superintendent received word from the state that they intended to take over the school, he called the union and said, ‘I don’t want to do this

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CONSIDER:

Clarify in writing the fundamental choice or choices that will form the basis of your life goals and day-to-day actions.

REFERENCE

Fritz, R. (1989). *The path of least resistance*. New York: Fawcett Columbine.

Use fundamental choices to determine goals and daily actions

“Either you are creating your life, or circumstances are.”

— Thomas Leonard

A group of principals recently described to me a presentation they had attended on how to make teachers’ learning a meaningful part of their daily work. They explained their frustration with a participant who had countered every suggestion offered by the presenter with a reason why it couldn’t be done. I responded, “Until someone has made a fundamental choice to do something, there’s always a reason not to do it,” a thought I undoubtedly had acquired from some wise person. I went on to explain my view that until a principal or other leader has chosen at a very basic level to have all teachers experience high-quality professional learning and teamwork each day, there will always be reasons why it can’t be done. The same could be said about many other worthy goals.

In *The Path of Least Resistance*, Robert Fritz (1989) says a “fundamental choice” occurs when “you commit yourself to basic life orientation or a basic state of being” (p. 188). Fundamental choices are like magnets that align and organize our goals and daily actions. Usually, a single choice governs our entire life, but sometimes individuals select one for their personal lives and another for their work.

To illustrate, in my personal life I aspire to an “A+” day every day. That means I don’t allow external circumstance to determine the quality of my life (it goes without saying that I’m not always successful). A fundamental choice for my professional life is to do all that I can within my sphere of influence to create a system of schools to which each of us would send our child to any classroom in any school.

Here are a few examples of fundamental

choices made by some well known and not so well known individuals:

“To affect the quality of the day — that is highest of arts.”

— Thoreau

“The rewards of living a full life may be measured in joyous moments rather than days or years. These are the treasures that return to mind in the quiet hours. The moments nobly lived, the challenges met, the truth spoken. Meeting life — taking responsibility and leaving it joyfully once taken.”

— Robert Greenleaf

“I wish to be up and doing, I wish to face each day with resolution and purpose. I wish to use every waking hour to give encouragement, to bless those whose burdens are heavy, to build faith and strength of testimony. It is the presence of wonderful people which stimulates the adrenaline. It is the look of love in their eyes which gives me energy.”

— Gordon Hinckley, age 92

“A pebble cast into a pond causes ripples that spread in all directions. Each one of our thoughts, words, and deeds is like that. We won’t sit down and feel hopeless. There’s too much work to do.”

— Dorothy Day

“One must have the adventurous daring to accept oneself as a bundle of possibilities and undertake the most interesting game in the world — making the most of one’s best.”

— Harry Emerson Fosdick

“Take care of yourself; take care of others; take care of this place.”

— Dee Hock



Pat Roy is co-author of *Moving NSDC's Staff Development Standards Into Practice: Innovation Configurations* (NSDC, 2003)

The heart of instructional leadership: Developing quality teaching

For years, principals have been expected to serve as *instructional leaders*. Most principals I've worked with want to do that job but aren't always sure what it means. The innovation configurations for the NSDC Standards for Staff Development provide some description of this role.

An instructional leader relentlessly **promotes educator's deep understanding of content knowledge and the use of research-based instructional strategies as a high priority in the school.** Teachers' deep, *conceptual* understanding of content is essential in order to assist students to meet rigorous academic standards. Using a variety of instructional strategies has been correlated to improved student learning. The principal promotes these outcomes by **encouraging staff to participate in ongoing, intensive district-based professional learning experiences that build content knowledge and use of research-based instructional strategies.** The district appropriately develops teachers' content knowledge so the school can focus on student learning needs. But the principal must also support district programs by **providing time to develop the use of deep understanding of content knowledge and use of research-based instructional strategies.** This means the principal provides time for teachers to work together and expects them to *use* new strategies with students. This expectation can be accomplished by **emphasizing content knowledge and instructional strategies during classroom observations and**

QUALITY TEACHING

Staff development that improves the learning of all students deepens educators' content knowledge, provides them with research-based instructional strategies to assist students in meeting rigorous academic standards, and prepares them to use various types of classroom assessments appropriately.

conversations with faculty. When the principal changes the focus of school conversations from procedures and memos to new knowledge and strategies, that tells teachers that what they know and do in the classroom is a primary concern in the school.

The principal underscores the importance of quality teaching by **modeling the use and importance of content knowledge and instructional strategies at staff meetings, committee meetings, and schoolwide events.**

The principal supports the development of quality teaching through the **allocation of resources, formal evaluations, and public recognition of teacher efforts.** All of these strategies use the organization's formal and informal systems to accentuate the importance of teachers' use of new knowledge and classroom skills.

Lastly, the principal **persists with the goal of deep content knowledge and use of research-based instructional strategies when challenged either internally or externally to alter that goal.** Schools are bombarded with initiatives and mandates that can pull attention away from critical skills. The instructional leader must maintain an unremitting focus on improving teachers' knowledge and instructional skills because of the impact on student learning.

When principals serve as instructional leaders, they not only set a culture but indicate what is important within that culture. When a principal wants to ensure quality teaching, the focus should remain with deep content knowledge and research-based instructional strategies.

Walk-Throughs

Walk-throughs offer a new way to view schools. A walk-through creates a schoolwide picture made up of many small snapshots.

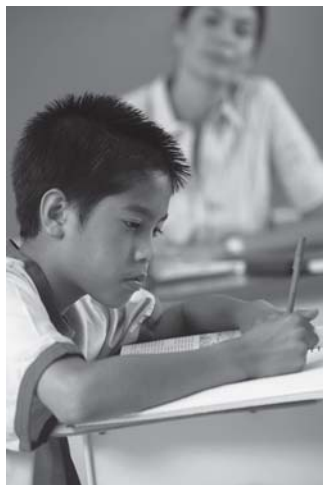
Also known as “data in a day,” “instructional walks,” and “learning walks,” the pattern of walk-throughs is roughly the same: A team of observers is dispatched to numerous classrooms where they spend about 10 minutes looking for very specific things. At the conclusion, the observers assemble their information and share what they have learned with the teachers whose rooms have been observed.

The plan presented here provides a description of how a walk-through might run in your school.

To learn more about walk-throughs, visit **From the Toolbox** in the members-only area of the NSDC web site, www.nsd.org. More detailed information is also available in *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning*, edited by Lois Brown Easton (NSDC, 2004) which is available through the NSDC Online Bookstore, <http://store.nsd.org>.

“Walk-throughs are most influential when they serve as a catalyst for reflective schoolwide discussion. Walk-throughs help educators continuously articulate and practice standards-focused teaching that enhances student learning.”

— Margery Ginsberg, writing about walk-throughs in *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (NSDC, 2004)



WALK-THROUGHS PROVIDE AN OPPORTUNITY TO:

- **Reinforce attention** on an instructional and learning focus in the school’s improvement plan.
- **Gather data** about instructional practice and student learning to supplement other data about school and student performance.
- **Stimulate collegial conversation** about teaching and learning through asking questions about what evidence is and isn’t observed.
- **Learn from other participants** through observations, questions, experiences, and perspectives.
- **Deepen understandings and improve practices** through continuous feedback.

Source: Perry and Associates.

Walk-Through Plan

Preparation meeting

Time: 30 minutes.

- Assemble members of the walk-through team.
- The principal identifies the focus for the walk-through, the classrooms that will be visited, and why those have been chosen for visits.
- The principal leads a discussion during which team members identify evidence that would support the focus. One team member records responses on a display board.
- Determine which team member will look for each type of evidence.
- Distribute feedback forms to each member.

Walk-through

Time: Between 10 to 15 minutes per classroom.

- All team members enter the classroom at the same time. Team members do not speak to each other during their time in the classroom.
- Team members sit at the back of the classroom unless they have a specific assignment to speak to students or examine student work.
- Team members make notes about their assigned area. If appropriate, team members may want to sketch out a map of the classroom that indicates the location of a piece of evidence they observed.
- At the end of the agreed-upon time, all team members leave the classroom together.

Debriefing – Outside the classroom

Time: 5 minutes per classroom.

- Team members walk a short way down the hall from the observed classroom.
- Speaking quietly, team members quickly share their observations regarding the last classroom visited.
- Team members then proceed to the next classroom.

Debriefing – Final

Time: 45 minutes.

- Walk-through team members assemble in the principal's office or other agreed-upon meeting place.
- Each visitor speaks about his or her observations. They provide specific evidence as well as attempt to present an overview of what they saw.
- Together, the team members identify trends, areas of strength, and areas that need improvement.
- Drawing on their own experience and knowledge, the visitors make suggestions about how to strengthen areas that need improvement.
- The principal makes notes on the discussion and collects the feedback forms. The principal decides the best way to provide feedback to the teachers whose classrooms were visited.

“Principals who do short walk-throughs several times a week often are the most effective principals in a school district. They can help teachers share methods that support student motivation and learning, and they contribute to a school’s focus on a direction and vision of success.”

— Margery Ginsberg, writing about walk-throughs in *Powerful Designs for Professional Learning* (NSDC, 2004)

A school at the brink plots a new course

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alone. I want the union to help. I don't want the state to take over this school.' He reached out to include us. He deserves a lot of credit for being willing to collaborate," Cullison said.

But Darlene Merry, associate superintendent for organizational development, said Cullison's work was pivotal. "Bonnie sat at the table to broker the deal at Broad Acres. She really is a model for collaborative leadership," Merry said.

Add to that the focused leadership of principal Jody Leleck and Broad Acres had all the necessary ingredients for making significant change.

IN THE BEGINNING

When Cullison initially met with the Broad Acres staff, she found teachers who were very angry by the implication that they had not been working hard enough.

"Teachers had the attitude that they needed to take care of their students first. These were students who went home every-day to abject poverty, empty houses with mattresses on the floor. Teachers believed they needed to nurture them and provide for them. They needed to make them feel safe. One of the first challenges was convincing teachers that the best way to take care of them was to give them the education they needed to compete with others," Cullison said.

"Zero-based staffing" was suggested during initial meetings about reforming Broad Acres. The union quickly expressed its opposition. "We said we were looking for a restructuring program that would allow most of the decision making to occur at

the school. We said we wanted to honor the people in that building to make decisions that would be best for students and that we would hold them accountable for student achievement," Cullison said.

What the union wanted in return were resources. One of the most critical pieces of the reform was the district's offer of extra pay for 15 days of professional development. The teachers at Broad Acres would ultimately choose to use this time by working an additional two hours each Wednesday. They use this time for planning sessions, study groups, and to examine student work.

"This is very different from the notion of 'combat pay.' We would not agree to that," Cullison said.

Coupled with that, the district wanted teachers to make a three-year commitment to remain in the school. The union agreed. "We had never done this before. But it was based on our belief that, in order to make real change, there needed to be consistency," Cullison said.

At this point, it was time to take this offer to the teachers. "Nobody was forced out. Nobody was asked to leave. There was a lot of soul searching on the part of teachers who were trying to decide if this was right for them," said Jody Leleck, who was principal during the years of greatest change. Leleck is now associate superintendent for curriculum and instructional programs.

In the end, two-thirds of the staff made the three-year commitment and stayed in the building. Significantly, no grievances were filed.

Then Leleck faced the challenge of filling the openings. "We thought people would be lining up for this great American experience. But nobody wanted to transfer from within the county," she said.

"I had some very talented candidates who just didn't believe it would work. In some cases, they really did not believe that poor kids could learn. That's not who I wanted in my building," Leleck said.

She also didn't make it easy to impress the interviewers. During each interview, she asked:

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JODY LELECK'S TIPS TO OTHER PRINCIPALS

1. Hire well. "Hire people who will be effective team members. Look at who you have and who you need to bring in."

2. Examine how you use time. "Instruction was not a priority. Our kids took field trips everywhere. Students walked attendance information down the hall every morning. We had 32 committees at the school — and none of them were focused on instruction." Today, Broad Acres allows only field trips that are tied to curriculum during instructional hours. All assemblies occur after school or on weekends, with a side benefit of enabling parents to participate.

3. Say "no, thank you." "When you're in a high-poverty school, everybody thinks they can fix you with their program. They want you to buy this. They want to give you that. You really have to stay focused. If it's not part of your focus, say no."

4. Get over the idea that you can work smarter, not harder. "It's never going to be easy. But it is going to be more rewarding."

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“Why are you worthy of teaching our kids?”

By the time Leleck was done, she had interviewed about 10 persons for each of the 27 positions that she filled. “But I hired absolutely fabulous people,” she said.

“When the people were there who needed to be there, I wasn’t the only person saying what needed to be said,” Leleck said.

CHARTING A NEW COURSE

The reform at Broad Acres was greatly helped by changes occurring at the district level. (To read more about this, see the February 2006 issue of *The Learning System*.)

During the summer of 2001, the entire Broad Acres staff took the Skillful Teaching course together. Created by Research for Better Teaching in Acton, Mass., the course is used throughout Montgomery County as a way to provide consistent instructional language for teachers.

In fall 2001, the school’s first staff development teacher began work at Broad Acres as part of the district’s initiative to have at least one educator in each building who focused on professional development. “This is one of the best things that this district has done,” Leleck said.

Leleck moved other money in her budget to enable her to create six positions that each had some responsibility for coaching teachers, especially in math and literacy. Those teachers worked with grade-level teams to plan lessons, model lessons, examine student work, study data about student achievement, and plan other necessary professional development for teachers.

“There was a big change in the understanding about professional development for teachers. They used to think that professional development meant going to a workshop. They did not understand the link between professional development and student achievement. They understand that now,” Leleck said.

Along with all of this came a much more rigorous use of data in the school. Leleck began requiring teachers to maintain running records on students and reinforced the importance of that

by regularly meeting personally with every teacher to go over those records and by setting up shared data folders on the school’s network. This enables every teacher to learn about the results in every other teacher’s classroom.

Cullison said this was instrumental in moving the culture of the school. “When you make data available like this, you create a complete openness and transparency,” she said.

But moving to greater use of data was more difficult than Leleck anticipated. “I was really naïve. I thought teachers would see where their students were and move them forward. I really had to teach them about the power of using that data, not just recording data about student learning,” Leleck said.

Data has become part of the way that Broad Acres does business. On the first teacher work day of each school year, every teacher receives a data notebook with information on every student in a teacher’s classroom plus an overview of data for that grade level, for the school, and for the district. All of this is broken down by content area. Teachers are expected to bring the data notebooks to every meeting.

Teachers attend monthly school improvement meetings that focus on the learning objectives. Teachers also meet twice a week to review data and every two weeks to examine student work.

“This drives home the point that teachers are expected to know where their kids are. It also makes it clear that we’re all responsible for all children,” Leleck said.

Although Leleck left Broad Acres for a job in central office, the transition to a new principal was relatively smooth. “I was really worried when I heard Jody was leaving. But she had empowered her staff in ways that very few principals do. It was the staff that would carry on the program. She was their coach, their facilitator, their support system. It was up to the district to select a principal who could come in and not be an authoritarian leader,” Cullison said.

She credits the district with being very deliberate about selecting Suzette Chagnon as the kind of principal who could build on the foundation created during the Leleck years. ■

“The tone was set right away. No question, there will be hard work, a very clear and consistent message. The belief was that ‘teachers can do it,’ the same positive message even in years when results were not good.”

— A classroom teacher quoted in the district’s case study of Broad Acres.

ISSN 0276-928X

The Learning Principal is published eight times a year by the National Staff Development Council, 5995 Fairfield Road, #4, Oxford, OH 45056, for \$49 of each membership. Periodicals postage paid at Wheelersburg, OH 45694.

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