

THE Flywheel EFFECT

Educators gain momentum from a model for continuous improvement

BY TIMOTHY D. KANOLD



“Good is the enemy of great. We don’t have great schools principally because we have good schools.”

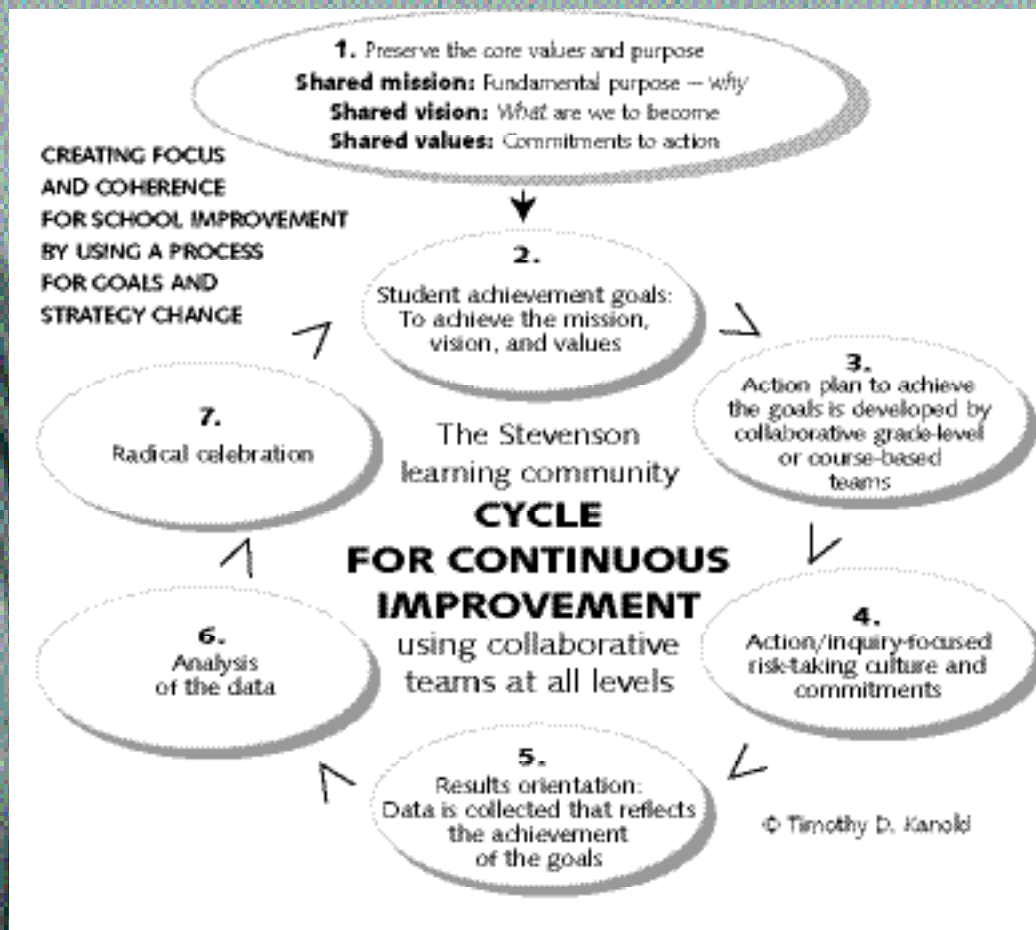
– James Collins in *Good to Great*, (2001, p. 1)

On the eve of receiving a fourth Blue Ribbon Award in spring 2002, staff at Adlai E.

Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Ill., met with a U.S. Department of Education representative for an exit interview. He told the joint faculty, staff, and administrative

committee he had discovered our school community had one primary fear for the school’s future. Every group he had encountered — parents, teachers, administrators, staff, and community — echoed the same thoughts: Would our school continue to embrace change? Would we continue to get better? Would we strive to improve?

Collectively, our fear was we



might stagnate. We might settle for being just “good.” We might rest on our record and achievements. And we might stop seeking to improve student learning. Then all of our efforts to become a great place for students to learn would become a distant memory.

The challenge was clear. How does a school such as ours continue to improve on already high levels of student learning? How do we sustain momentum for continuous (and never-ending) improvement and avoid the human tendency toward entropy?

In its simplest sense, the answer is obvious: Stay focused on our individual and collective adult behaviors and respond to any manifestation or source of student failure. Pound away at an intensive, singular mindset that we, as educators, will do whatever it takes to help kids learn. Yet the answer to sustaining quality effort,

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quality achievement, and high levels of demonstrated student learning is more complex. As a professional learning community, we must embody the preserve/change model James Collins described in *Good to Great* (Harper Collins, 2001): “Enduring great companies preserve their core values and purpose while their business strategies and operating practices endlessly adapt to a changing world. This is the magical combination of ‘preserve the core and stimulate progress’ ” (p. 195).

Collins’ strategy fueled the

Stevenson learning community cycle for continuous improvement (see figure on p. 17) — a process that has addressed our collective fear of failing to continue to grow. Our model for continuous improvement allows us to achieve two primary goals. First, we are able to create a process for change that is first and foremost about producing tangible results, results that begin to take care of themselves. Second, we are able to preserve our core values by maintaining and celebrating actions that advance us toward those core values.

The cycle builds continuous improvement into all teachers' and administrators' routine practices.

Dennis Sparks identified several fundamental barriers to professional learning communities, including a lack of clarity regarding values, intentions, and beliefs (Sparks, 2005). Clarity of vision is the first issue addressed in our preserve/change model.

We work to preserve our culture's core values, the beliefs and assumptions that define us as a high school district through constant and effective communication. We communicate by embracing the simple idea of reciprocal relationships. Good ideas can emerge from anywhere in the organization. If a faculty member has a great idea he or she believes will foster greater student success, we expect that the teacher will discuss the idea or initiative with team members. The team leader is responsible for ensuring all

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ideas are listened to with respect and thoroughly discussed. The idea, in turn, may be communicated to the principal or division chair and, on occasion, may influence the behavior of the entire organization. It is important that communication is not only top-down.

Our core values focus on excel-

The five E's

Every adult action either moves us toward or away from our desired future, and the school board, administration, and faculty are collectively responsible for promoting, protecting, and defending the five E's that capture the core values:

1. Excellence in curriculum, instruction, assessment.

We will ensure the curriculum, instruction, and assessment represent the best practices in our profession. While accommodating individual student differences, interests, and abilities, excellence demands we develop a common, coherent, rigorous curriculum that actively engages all students.

2. Equity and access for all students.

We will challenge each student to give his or her best effort intellectually and ethically. Adults must exhibit genuine care and concern for each student and must collectively commit to providing opportunities for students to fully access the curriculum at its most rigorous levels.

3. Educating as a professional learning community.

We will commit to ongoing professional development as a model of lifelong learning. The board, administration, and faculty must function in high-performing, collaborative teams focused on student achievement. Staff development is a job-embedded and collaborative process, not a singular event.

4. Environment for learning.

We must provide an emotionally and physically safe, supportive learning environment. In this collaborative culture, we treat our diverse community of students and staff with respect, consideration, and acceptance, recognizing that learning is a dynamic and socially constructed process requiring engagement and supportive relationships with one's peers and teachers.

5. Engagement with the community.

We will value the importance of collaborative relationships with our extended community — families, residents, businesses, government agencies, and education systems. We must strive to serve as a lighthouse, interacting and collaborating with the educational community.

lence, equity, educating, environment, and engagement (see box above). The five E's provide an image of what we are to become and also insight into our responsibilities and obligations. They represent our agreed-upon standards. As our constituents change, veterans teach new parents, teachers, administrators, and students about these core values and purposes. New faculty and administrators are assigned mentors, and course team leaders help new team members adjust to the demands and expectations of the course. As a professional learning community of responsibility,

these core purposes are "embedded in the ideas that encourages us to respond from within, defining our norms, values, beliefs, students' hopes and dreams" (Sergiovanni, 2004).

BRINGING CORE VALUES TO LIFE

Although the core values point us toward becoming a great school, they merely describe a better future. To become a great place for student learning, Stevenson must never stop being a place of focused action, continuous improvement, and change.

The cycle of continuous improvement model provides the steps. Each

step is followed at two levels: the district or school level and the team/curriculum-based level.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT GOALS

Every course-based team in the high school (for example, algebra, biology, photography, theater, junior English) meets in August, at the start of the school year, to set specific student achievement improvement goals. Using the SMART school teams model from Anne Conzemius and Jan O’Neill (2002), the teacher teams discuss the previous year’s trend data and examine specific areas of program weakness. The teacher course-based teams are led by a fellow faculty member or team leader. The team leader is a supervisor of the course team. Teacher teams meet at the start of the school year during professional development days, during 12 specified student late arrival days, and one morning each week. We believe that for required teacher collaboration to be effective, it should be part of teachers’ normal workday and workload.

During the professional development day at the start of the year, teams have time to establish two to three SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, results-oriented, and time-bound) goals for the upcoming school year. The teams collaboratively decide on an action plan to achieve the goals, setting out the steps they will take to help students achieve the intended goal. The course-based team goals must be aligned with district and school-level SMART goals. Stevenson’s district goals focus on reducing failure rates, increasing access to rigorous curricula, increasing the percent of students attending college, and improving student performance on state and national exams.

At the district level, for example, a team goal for students might be: “We will increase the percentage of English as a Second Language students that

Adlai E. Stevenson High School
Lincolnshire, Ill.

Grades: 9-12
Enrollment: 4,605
Staff: 307
Racial/ethnic mix:

White:	79.6%
Black:	0.9%
Hispanic:	2.9%
Asian/Pacific Islander:	12.2%
Native American:	0.1%
Other:	4.3%

Limited English proficient: 3.6%
Languages spoken: 44
Free/reduced lunch: 1.6%
Special education: 10%

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meet or exceed standards on the state NCLB exam from 42% to 60% by spring 2007.”

A school goal might be: “We will increase the number of students participating in at least one college-level course from 48% to 60% by fall 2008.”

A subject-area teaching team might set a goal such as: “Students will achieve an average score of 25.0 on the ACT exam by spring 2007.”

Other course team-level goals that might help the district or school to accomplish its broader goals might include:

- “We will decrease the number of students receiving a grade of D or F in biology from 35% to 25% by the end of first semester.”
- “We will increase the percentage of students performing at the ‘meets or exceeds’ level on the quadratics subtest of the Algebra 1 exam from 42% to 60% by the end of the 2005-06 school year.”
- “We will increase the percentage of sophomore students continuing participation in third-year Spanish from 65% to 80% within the next two years.”

Course team-level and district-level goals primarily focus on student achievement, but also expand their focus to include participation rate data and student satisfaction data. District-level goals are established and reviewed each August at the board/administrative team retreat.

ACTION PLAN TO ACHIEVE THE GOAL

At this stage, each team works collaboratively to plan and develop action steps to reach the goal of improved student learning in their course or program. Teachers may create and share common products such as warm-up problems, exams, reviews for exams, rubrics, long- and short-term projects, homework expectations, new curriculum materials or instruction methods, methods of integrating technology, and specific motivational techniques teachers believe will connect with students. In this planning stage, teachers seek common ground for the course that will raise the expectations for all students in the program.

ACTION/INQUIRY AND RISK TAKING

Once the achievement goal is set and the teams begin to take action, authentic adult learning takes place. As teams meet weekly, teachers discuss what is and isn’t working and which action steps make sense. They also hold one another accountable for taking the agreed-upon actions. For example, if the team decides a certain technology should be integrated into the curriculum because teachers believe it will help achieve various goals, including their SMART goals, every team member must honor the agreed-upon action. Ideally, the team does not let a team member drift into a bad habit,

We believe that for required teacher collaboration to be effective, it should be part of teachers’ normal workday and workload.

Adlai E. Stevenson High School's record of academic achievement

- **Blue Ribbon.** Adlai E. Stevenson High School is the only high school in Illinois, and one of only three in the nation, to earn four Blue Ribbon Awards for Excellence from the U.S. Department of Education (1987, 1991, 1998, and 2002).
- **Innovation.** Stevenson received a New American High School Award from the U.S. Department of Education in 1998 for innovation and successfully implementing school improvement reforms.
- **Newsweek.** In 2005, Stevenson was ranked among the top 100 high schools in America by *Newsweek*, the fourth time the magazine has listed the school in its top 100 (in addition to 1998, 2000, and 2003).
- **U.S. News & World Report.** Stevenson also has been ranked among the top 100 schools in the country by *U.S. News & World Report* (2000).
- **Publications.** Aspects of Stevenson's curriculum and academic philosophy have been highlighted in publications including *Business Week*, *The New Yorker*, *USA Today*, and *The New Republic*.
- **AP program.** Stevenson's Advanced Placement program is one of the most comprehensive available. In 2005, 3,029 AP exams were given, more than anywhere in the world. Although an increasing number of Stevenson students take AP exams (the number of students has nearly doubled in the past seven years, from 723 to 1,314, and the number of exams has jumped from 1,611 to 3,029), their results remain consistently high. The average score in 2005 was 3.9.
- **The ACT.** Stevenson's performance on the ACT is contrary to national trends of flat scores. While state and national composite scores have remained constant, Stevenson has consistently improved scores over the past decade even as 99% of students take the exam. In 2005, Stevenson's average composite score was 25.1. Since 1982, Stevenson's average ACT score has increased from 20.6, while Illinois has risen from 18.6 to 20.3 and the U.S. composite has moved from 18.4 to 20.9.
- **Authors.** Prominent authors in education have written about the school. It has been discussed in Thomas Sergiovanni's *Strengthening the Heartbeat: Leading and Learning Together* (Jossey-Bass, 2004), Michael Schmoker's *The Results Fieldbook: Practical Strategies From Dramatically Improved Schools* (ASCD, 2001), and *From the Inside Out: Learning From the Positive Deviance in Your Organization*, by Joan Richardson (NSDC, 2004). Stevenson also has been written about in several education periodicals, including *Educational Leadership*, *Principal*, and *JSD*. In 2004, Stevenson was featured in a video series aimed at educators, *Staff Development for Excellence*, produced by Lee Cantor and Associates.
- **Illinois.** In 1995, Illinois State Board of Education officials chose Stevenson as the first district in the state to receive its highest honor, the "Those Who Excel Learning Community Award of Excellence."

practice, or isolate himself from others. Realistically, the team leader, department chair, or principal must be willing to step in and hold all team members accountable.

For example, the sophomore

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English team decides to use a specific homework make-up policy for all students in the course. One team member decides not to use this policy and applies a more stringent policy. His decision causes two problems. First, he is violating an agreed-upon group norm. Second, his students now will

be graded differently than all other students in the course. How does a grade for the sophomore English course have meaning if teachers do not apply consistent and congruent assessment standards? These questions and the expectation that the teacher will meet the agreed-upon team standard are first communicated by the team leader and fellow team members.

This course of action reflects moving beyond superficial compliance and into a more authentic form of lateral accountability (Fullan, 2001, p. 118). If the teacher fails to comply, the principal or department chair will intervene.

A RESULTS ORIENTATION

Throughout the cycle of continuous improvement, the team leader collects and shares data on an ongoing basis as the team arrives at the agreed-upon deadline. At our school, this data includes grade distributions, semester final exam results, NCLB results, AP exam results, formative assessment results (weekly and monthly), subtest performance results, and student satisfaction levels in our programs. For example, we surveyed our students five years after graduation to determine if our training and effort prepared them for their post-high school experiences. The data revealed many positive aspects of our

school programs, yet we consistently found a pattern in the data collection that highlighted a glaring weakness. We were not preparing students to be able to do meaningful research work in college. The data revealed low student satisfactory rates in this area and provided a focus for a next stage of continuous improvement.

Subsequently, a research committee task force established a schoolwide, research-based curriculum, and identified 12 courses throughout the curriculum that would teach specific research skill development.

ANALYSIS OF DATA

At this stage, teams observe strengths and target weaknesses. They set benchmarks and analyze trend data to determine whether they met their goals. Did the number of Ds and Fs decrease? Did the subtest performance on the final exam increase? Did more students take AP exams? Did our adult actions and plans make any difference? Did we improve?

If the team answers yes, teachers set new goals and begin the process again. If the answer is no, we examine the action plan and look for areas in which we could focus our work differently. Either way, the cycle of continuous improvement and the momentum for improvement continue to refocus our effort and energy.

The timeline for analysis varies depending on when data are available.

RADICAL CELEBRATION

Radical celebration can be difficult to work into a culture where the expended effort will never be good enough. If a teacher team or administrative team does not make its student learning goal, teachers refocus their plan. If a team does make its student learning goal, members set a higher goal. In a school serious about pursuing continuous improvement for student learning, teachers and administrators are never at rest. The angst

and unrest caused by this pursuit can be diminished with radical celebrations — celebrations of movement toward the core purposes, of movement toward achieving SMART goals, of trend data that shows improvement, of individual and collective adult actions, and of effort that avoids excuses for why we can't improve.

The wheel of continuous improvement reflects the flywheel effect Collins described: "When you let the flywheel do the talking, you don't need to fervently communicate your goals. People just extrapolate from the momentum of the flywheel for themselves. 'Hey, if we just keep doing this, look where we can go!' As people decide to turn the fact of potential into the fact of results, the goal almost sets itself" (Collins, p. 177).

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