Heroic efforts: Maintain a focus on priorities

One of the shocking realities in many low-achieving schools is the sheer number of goals which populate their school improvement plans. Their needs are great, and every specialist can recommend some program or initiative or change that needs to be implemented in order to improve student learning. Many of these recommendations remind me of the old story of the blind men and the elephant. While each was in touch with a single element, they never saw the entire animal. I'm afraid the same might be true of our well-intentioned recommendations to schools.

American curriculum has been accused of being a mile wide and an inch deep; the same seems to be true of our improvement goals. Educational researchers are exploring this reality and making the same recommendations — identify a *limited* number of improvement goals (Fullan, 2006; West, 1998; Schmoker, 2006). What is a limited number? Two or three priority goals (West, 1998). With a myriad of goals, the impact of any single goal is minimized because of the limited amount of time that can be spent on that goal. The irony is that educators are very busy with activities intended to pursue all these goals and yet little actually changes. One study found that the size of the planning document is inversely related to the amount and quality of implemented goals (Fullan, 2006, p. 59). The result, I found, is that educators begin to believe that their students **can't** learn — after all, they are doing everything possible and their calendars and stress levels prove it.

So, what is a principal to do? The principal needs to **focus resources on a small number of high-priority goals** (Roy & Hord, 2003, p. 70). First, the principal **works with faculty to identify a small number of high-priority goals**. High-priority goals are not the *low-hanging fruit* — the easily-within-reach ones but the ones that will have the most wide-ranging impact on the largest number of students. For many schools, the priority goal focuses on reading; for others it might be writing.

Investigating research will help the principal and faculty identify their priorities. Next, the principal **provides resources to support the accomplishment** of that priority. This support includes financial resources but faculty time for collaborative professional development is more important.

Finally, the principal **ensures that resources are not diverted to other competing issues**. This final action may be a bigger challenge than the others. There always seems to be a new strategy waiting in the wings to take center stage. Maintaining a focus on a priority goal will take heroic efforts and enormous political capital but will pay off in greater trust for the principal among faculty members as well as results for students. This unwavering focus helps faculty members make daily decisions, target their efforts, and accomplish student learning goals.

Resources: Staff development that improves the learning of all students requires resources to support adult learning and collaboration.

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

REFERENCES

Fullan, M. (2006). *Turnaround leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Roy, P. & Hord, S. (2003). *Moving NSDC's staff development standards into practice: Innovation configurations, Volume I.* Oxford, OH: NSDC.

Schmoker, M. (2006). *Results now*. Alexandria, VA: ASCD.

West, M. (1998). Quality in schools: Developing a model for school improvement. In A. Hargreaves (Ed.), *International handbook of educational change*. Norwell, MA: Kluwer Academic Publishers.

Learn more about NSDC's standards: www. nsdc.org/ standards/ index.cfm