

IF YOU DON'T TRY, YOU CAN'T SUCCEED AT SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

I stumbled into a lesson about taking risks and facing fears when I was hiking in Arizona last spring.

Actually, I wasn't even hiking at the time. I was only preparing to hike.

I was savoring the view of Oak Creek Canyon near Sedona, Ariz., when my left foot connected with a 30-pound boulder that had slid onto the sidewalk. I went launching forward, landing awkwardly on my hands and my left knee — and a couple of other rocks also lying in my path.

My husband immediately reached to help me up, but I lay there for several more moments trying to get my bearings. What happened? Was I hurt or just stunned? What hurt?

When I finally allowed him to help me to my feet, I was still examining myself for injuries. My jeans and shirt were dusty but not torn. There was no blood. My hands pulsed with sensation, but otherwise everything seemed to work just fine.

As I realized that I was fine, I began to shudder and cry. My husband seemed alarmed. "Are you OK?" he asked. "I thought you said you were OK."

He retrieved ice from the cooler in our car, and after soaking my hands for a few minutes, I was ready for the hike.

I was embarrassed that I hadn't looked ahead to see the obstacles in my way. I was embarrassed that I had fallen awkwardly in front of my nimble triathlete husband just as we were beginning our big adventure. I was embarrassed that I had cried.

Does this sound familiar to anyone who has launched headlong into another school improvement initiative? Someone, often a district administrator or an external consultant, tells you about the great experience you're going to have and the great results you're going to get. So you forge ahead, looking only at the horizon without taking into account the little obstacles along the way. Sometimes you become frustrated because the work that you believed would improve student learning didn't achieve the results you wanted in the way that you expected. You get beat up

in the process when the media finds out that your school didn't deliver as well as another school. You're ready to give up, embarrassed that you were not as good as you wanted to be.

My tumble during the early phase of my hike taught me to pay closer attention during the journey. Instead of looking only at the big picture, I kept an eye on exactly what was on the path ahead of me. Anyone embarking on any new work or new adventure can't anticipate all of the obstacles they will encounter. A quick scan of the known environment may reveal some of the potential pitfalls. But others are sure to pop up along any path.

I also learned to pause and take account of what was around me and to appreciate how far I had journeyed. I'm grateful that I plunged ahead after my fall instead of allowing the incident to scare me off. If I had stopped, I would have missed rocky streams and soaring red canyon walls. I would have missed the green growth of grass and trees in places where there seemed to be no earth. I would have missed seeing trees that looked as if they had been sunburned.

The morning after my fall, I discovered large bruises on my legs and chest. I was a little achy, but we were heading to the Grand Canyon and there was no opportunity for downtime. Once at the mighty canyon, my husband, as usual, was game for an adventure. He had been there once before and was eager to hike down into the canyon. I knew this was coming, so I browsed the various trails and found one that intrigued me enough to suggest it.

About 200 feet down the canyon paths, I realized I had taken on a bigger challenge than I expected. I tremble when I cross large bridges. Stepping onto the ridges of the Grand Canyon presented me a much greater landscape to view than crossing any bridge I've ever encountered.

I was immobilized with fear. All I could imagine at that moment was that I would tumble over the edge. Then I saw dozens of other people trudging up from the bottom of the canyon. They seemed quite healthy, and none of them looked any more fit than me. In fact, I thought I was in much better shape than most of them.

So I took a deep breath and moved ahead.

I remembered how I had gotten to this point. I'm not one to be led down any path without doing my homework first. I wanted to be ambitious without overreaching my



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skills. I also carried the lessons from the previous day's hike with me. School improvement work is no different. Not all reform initiatives are created equal. Teachers and principals have to take the responsibility of becoming knowledgeable about their options rather than sitting back and just accepting what someone else suggests. You know your schools, your students, and your staffs better than anyone else. The more you know, the more you will be able to fine-tune a program to fit your needs and your abilities and the more likely that others will heed your input. At the same time, if you want to achieve real change with students, you must embark on a program that requires you and your colleagues to challenge yourselves and gives you opportunities to increase your abilities.

When you start down your path, focus on every step of the work, not just the big picture. Looking out over the Grand Canyon too early or too often would have terrified me. But settling down onto a (safe) rock for a mid-morning apple and at lunchtime gave me the opportunity to appreciate how far I had traveled and to savor the view.

My husband, who's run several marathons, reminds me that even dedicated athletes can feel discouraged during a tough competition. They get through by attending to the small pieces of the race. "The finish just seems so far away, so you have to focus internally. Every breath. Every step.

Every motion. Just hold the course. In time, the next marker comes around, and the next and the next. And finishing isn't just a possibility, it's a certainty," he says.

Might you get hurt? Yes. You may be embarrassed by a blunder. I've seen plenty of runners stumble, even lose their breakfast along the sidelines, and some who have had to walk the last several miles of a race. You may be embarrassed by something you've done. But you could also just as easily be embarrassed by something that you have not done. How would I have felt, for example, if I had returned home to tell my children that Mom was too much of a fraidy-cat to hike down the Grand Canyon?

I think I'm safe in saying that nobody has ever died in the course of school improvement. To be sure, egos have been bruised, and people have been frustrated when they failed to achieve their goals as quickly or easily as they would have liked. But the pain of not taking the chance is far worse than any injuries incurred by acting.

My father used to counsel me that you can't win the game you don't enter. Even if you fail to reach the summit on the hike or the finish line of the race, you will learn. But learning requires joining the adventure and taking the risk. There is little to be learned by sitting on the sidelines, whether you're talking about canyons in Arizona or school improvement in Detroit. ■