



6 CHALLENGES

ARE KEY FOR HIGH-PERFORMING SCHOOLS THAT AIM TO ACHIEVE MORE

BY
ROSSI RAY-TAYLOR,
SHARON BASKERVILLE,
SHELLEY BRUDER,
ELAINE BENNETT,
AND
KAREN SCHULTE

A tenet of meaningful change is creating conditions of urgency to act and displeasure with the status quo. For many schools, these conditions are present every day. Looming budget crises, public scorn for inadequate academic performance, and fleeing student populations create the crises that act as catalysts for change.

Yet across the country, some schools are hallmarks of high academic performance. These schools display consistently high test performance, and their students are sought by competitive colleges and universities. These schools have bountiful resources, teachers teaching in their college major area of study who receive frequent professional development, who attend national

and regional professional conferences, and who read professional journals and research. These schools are successful, with consistently above-average test scores, low dropout rates, high percentages of children attending college, and active and involved parents. By most measures, these schools are considered great.

What makes these schools successful in the eyes of many is the promise of achievement for their students. But many high-performing districts are experiencing a changing mix of students, and too often hidden in the performance data are populations of students for whom the value-added of life in Lake Wobegon has not arrived. We sometimes find it convenient to marginalize students with whom we are not successful. They become the

students from “that neighborhood,” the students who transferred in from the city, the students who are mobile, or who ride the bus, or whose parents do not speak English. The unspoken message seems to be that they would be so much easier to teach if they were more like their privileged classmates. The challenge facing high-performing schools is to help teachers and administrators develop the skills and attitudes to enable all students to access and take advantage of what great schools offer.

High-performing schools face unique challenges for continuous improvement. The role of professional developers is to provide experiences that cause teachers, principals, and other educators to reflect on their practices and to continually work

toward changing those practices to improve all students’ achievement. Supporting and encouraging this type of change is not an easy task (Barth, 2004, pp. 1-40; Fullan, 2001; Quinn, 1996, pp. 4-6, 15-25). How can we combat reluctance to seek even higher levels of achievement and begin to better define and work toward success for all students? Lessons learned from work within the Minority Student Achievement Network have revealed several challenges.

**Challenge #1:
Be clear about what we mean by
success and access to success.**

Educators often lack a conceptual model of what it means to be not just good, but great. When pressed, we talk in terms of test scores, dropout

rates, and percentages of students going on to colleges and universities. We leave ourselves ample room to fail some, if not many, students. The challenge in high-performing schools is to unravel the traditions and legacies that have been hallmarks of success. Leaders at all levels should scrutinize the system's policies, beliefs, and practices, checking for alignment with the system's stated values.

Whether intended or not, actions often send strong and sometimes conflicting messages about the system's beliefs. For example, some high-performing schools sort students by ability. Once they are defined as having a certain ability, students are locked in and steered toward an intractable sequence of courses offering little opportunity to "jump tracks." In many cases, track placement is deter-

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mined by a student's behavior, attendance, homework completion, ability to employ a tutor, learning style, or the number of available seats in top-level courses rather than by student knowledge or potential in the subject. Once in

a track, students are effectively locked out of some course options. For example, many schools make decisions about students' high

school math and science placements based on their middle school performance. This practice often creates separate but unequal tracks that block access to college gatekeeper courses such as second-year algebra and chemistry.

Attendance policies that automatically fail a student due to poor attendance or policies restricting them from making up work during suspensions are other examples of systemic practices and policies that limit some students' access.

**Challenge #2:
Create a school culture safe for change.**

An early step in establishing continuous improvement is creating a school culture in which teachers feel it is safe to take risks. Without a safe harbor from which to explore the need for change, too many teachers and principals will retreat to the safety of relative success or success for most, strengthening the case for the status quo.

One method for creating that trust is a scripted protocol followed during staff meetings for improving student-teacher relationships (Ferguson, 2002). Specific questions for discussion focus on five stages of developing teacher-student relationships that support student success:

- Promoting caring, trust, and interest;

- Balancing teacher control and student autonomy;
- Helping students become ambitious learners;
- Helping students avoid discouragement; and
- Helping students retain and use new learning.

Traditional staff meetings are replaced by professional conversations and discourse. As staffs explore issues around these ideas, they feel safer in trying new practices and sharing and discussing the results.

Another promising practice in creating safe environments for educators is an evolving change in teacher evaluations. Ann Arbor (Michigan) Public Schools leaders developed a collaborative teacher evaluation system that encourages veterans to try an alternative form of evaluation resembling an action research project. Teachers identify goals for improvement, develop and implement an action plan, and share results with colleagues. A strong, collaborative teacher evaluation process, as well as similar processes for principals and other administrators, can lay the groundwork for constructive conversations about student achievement, including pedagogy, assessment, and expectations.

**Challenge #3:
Commit to high levels of achievement for all.**

Educational professionals in high-performing schools and districts sometimes believe nothing can be done about the small percentage of students not achieving at acceptable levels, rather than focusing on the impact teaching has on maximizing student learning.

When leaders examine data about which students are not achieving, they may uncover underlying issues of race, class, and gender. Professional development then must focus not only on pedagogy and curriculum, but also on teachers' relationships

ROSSI RAY-TAYLOR is executive director of the Minority Student Achievement Network and a former school superintendent. You can contact her at 1840 Michelle Court, Ann Arbor, MI 48105, (847) 424-7185, fax (734) 913-4875, e-mail: rraytaylor@msanetwork.org.

SHARON BASKERVILLE is the principal of Fry Elementary School in Naperville, Ill., and a former central office administrator. You can contact her at 3204 Tall Grass Drive, Naperville, IL 60564, (630) 428-7400, fax (630) 428-7401, e-mail: sharon_baskerville@ipdsd.org.

SHELLEY BRUDER is the principal of Bach Elementary School in Ann Arbor, Mich. You can contact her at 600 W. Jefferson, Ann Arbor, MI 48103, (734) 994-1949, fax (734) 994-8239, e-mail: bruder@aaps.k12.mi.us.

ELAINE BENNETT is a teacher at Northside Elementary School in Ann Arbor, Mich. You can contact her at 912 Barton Drive, Ann Arbor, MI 48105, (734) 994-1958, ext. 26445, fax (734) 665-4109, e-mail: bennette@aaps.k12.mi.us.

KAREN SCHULTE is an assistant professor of special education at Eastern Michigan University and a former district professional development facilitator. You can contact her at #114 Porter, Eastern Michigan University, Ypsilanti, MI 48197, (734) 487-7120, ext. 2675, fax (734) 487-2473, e-mail: kschulte@emich.edu.

MEMBERSHIP

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Cherry Hill Public Schools

Grades: K-12. Cherry Hill, NJ
www.cherryhill.k12.nj.us/

Cleveland Heights-University Heights City School District

Grades: K-12. University Heights, OH
www.chuh.org

The Minority Student Achievement Network is a national coalition of 25 multiracial, urban-suburban school districts across the United States. The Network's mission is to discover, develop, and implement the means to ensure high academic achievement for students of color, specifically African-American and Latino students. For more information or to join MSAN, see www.msanetwork.org/ or call (847) 424-7185, fax (847) 424-7192, or write Minority Student Achievement Network, 1600 Dodge Ave., Evanston, IL 60204.

Columbia Public Schools

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www.eths.k12.il.us

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Grades: K-8. Evanston, IL
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Grades: K-12. Farmington, MI
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Grades: K-12. Green Bay, WI
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Grades: K-12. Hamden, CT
www.hamden.k12.ct.us

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Grades: K-12. Montclair, NJ
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Oak Park and River Forest High School District 200

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Grades: K-8. Oak Park, IL
www.op97.k12.il.us

Princeton Regional Schools

Grades: K-12. Princeton, NJ
www.prs.k12.nj.us

Shaker Heights City School District

Grades: K-12. Shaker Heights, OH
www.shaker.org

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Grades: K-12. Brookline, MA
http://bec.brookline.mec.edu/publicschools/

Windsor Public Schools

Grades: K-12. Windsor, CT
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with and beliefs about students (Ferguson, 2002).

Glenn Singleton encourages school staffs to discuss the impact of race on student achievement by having “courageous conversations” about race-biased school design, curriculum, instruction, and assessment (Sparks, 2002; Singleton, 2003). Discussions must be expanded to include other variables, such as socioeconomic class and language preference.

Another useful strategy is to help teachers understand student needs

and school experiences through book clubs. Authors Elaine Bennett and Karen Schulte facilitated a districtwide book group for many years in Ann Arbor, Mich., schools to discuss the relationship between race and student achievement and its impact on classroom practice (Bennett & Schulte, 2003). To be effective, book clubs must exist over time, follow structured protocols for conversations, and observe norms of safe and effective discussion. Many districts have also found it useful to engage princi-

pals and other school leaders in these discussions.

Yet another useful strategy is listening to students. The Minority Student Achievement Network, a national coalition of 25 multiracial, urban and suburban school districts committed to eliminating the achievement gap, sponsors an annual student conference focused on developing student leadership to help improve student achievement. Students describe school practices that have affected their learning and suggest changes to

curricula, teaching practices, district policies, and relationships with teachers. For example, a group of students from one school asked that teachers assign seats and student work groups for group projects so students could avoid social pressure and isolation that interfere with productivity. Even high-performing schools can learn when teachers are willing to listen to students.

**Challenge #4:
Enable teachers to collect and analyze their own student achievement data and determine their own professional development.**

Teachers and principals already have more data than they need. What is lacking, however, is teacher and principal ownership of their students' data. Without disaggregating data, they cannot see past the averages that tell a story of high achievement for all. Additionally, data often come from outside (mandated standardized testing), and educators may disagree with what is being assessed and when it is being assessed. This creates the denial Jawanza Kunjufu (2005, p. 19) identified as the first of four stages of change. In high-performing schools, it is easy to focus only on high-perform-

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ing students; data often mask the fact that some student groups are struggling. How can data become the impetus for change? Improvement goals must be few, focused on actual classroom work, specific, measurable, observable, and developed by the staff involved (Schmoker, 1999). Grade-level or department goals then become part of the building improvement plan. Because they are created by teachers for a purpose, they then are not plans created in a vacuum to

meet a district or state mandate and left to collect dust on the shelf.

In schools in which most students are achieving at high levels, it becomes even more imperative that the connection between professional development content and the achievement of all students (high- and low-achieving, as well as those in-between) is made explicit. As teachers and principals become skilled at collecting and analyzing their own data, they need help interpreting research and identifying promising strategies and interventions. Professional developers must offer a menu of choices to meet the needs of adult learners at all stages of learning.

**Challenge #5:
Stay the course.**

Too often, schools and districts fall victim to short-lived or shortsighted educational initiatives that disappear before their effectiveness can be evaluated. By committing to a common mission, staff can change the "this, too, shall pass" mindset to one that says: "Coming together is the beginning; working together is progress; staying together is success."

Coming together around a common idea, initiative, or ideology is good, but is only the beginning. What happens next either sustains the effort or sends the best intentions into an educational abyss. Working together is the critical ingredient in the formula for ensuring that new initiatives have time to gel. School districts may come together around a common mission, goal, or initiative of continuous improvement only to find that staff are having a difficult time working together to maintain the momentum.

This results in an educational inertia or the inability to create or support trusting relationships within the school community. Relationships and good leadership are crucial to any school endeavor's success, whether it's

implementing new initiatives or creating and maintaining high standards.

The key to continuing school improvement efforts in high-performing schools is to stay focused long enough to assess the progress of the original mission, goals, and initiatives. Good schools improve when they are not afraid to risk proven "success" by trying new ideas and redefining success as a goal that can be reached by all students.

**Challenge #6:
Connect the dots.**

Communities expect high-achieving schools to be on the cutting edge of educational reform while preserving those practices that have served successful students well in the past. Some in the school community may fear, however, that innovations focused on serving underachieving students will take away resources directed at successful students. These issues create unique challenges for high-achieving schools, which face pressure to uphold the traditions of success while adopting new and innovative practices. The challenge is for leaders to acknowledge the need for change and to provide an explicit rationale for change while demonstrating the value the change has for those who already are successful.

District and school leaders can connect the dots between tradition and change by making clear how each expected change fits into a continuous stream of improvement and responds to evidence, current conditions, future outlook, and proven practices. Explanations must include a framework of respect for and recognition of the work that has gone on in the past.

A particularly valuable strategy for helping people see connections is district roundtable discussions, during which school staff members share their efforts to improve student achievement, including successes and failures. Sharing in this way helps

building staff begin thinking from a district perspective. Visuals (flow-charts, graphic organizers) that connect various reform efforts and building initiatives can also be used. The connections and foci must survive from year to year, instead of being rewritten each year. All decisions in a district, from professional development to budget allocations, must reflect these priorities.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Given the myriad challenges facing high-achieving districts, the political ramifications of change become more public, creating more risks for leaders and building more walls of defense around classrooms.

The challenge for professional developers is to find the courage to remind those around us of our schools' stated missions and beliefs, and to constantly monitor our own work and behavior as models and examples for others. The missing link in reaching higher performance in

already high-performing schools is often the passion and the commitment to achieve more. We must challenge colleagues to emerge from behind the shield of success and face the demand of success for all.

Successful schools must not let success get in the way of needed changes and improvement. Professional development leaders must continue to look for and examine any barriers that might exist for any students.

For high-performing schools struggling to find the urgency to improve, the catalyst lies in a central truth: A school is no more successful than its least successful students. There is no time to stand still.

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