1. Overview

2. Leadership Leverage

   What matters most in leadership?
   Achievement and equity
   Getting to critical mass, 90% of teachers – it’s a non-linear relationship –
   “just a little bit more” is not good enough

3. Leadership Maps™ – 2007 Evidence on Improving Student Achievement

   Most Effective Strategies:
   - Writing and note-taking
   - Recognition of Achievement
   - Alignment
   - Teacher Assignment
   - Deep content analysis
   - Monitoring
   - Interdisciplinary assessment
   - Teaching strategies
   - Student engagement
   - Feedback to faculty

4. School Culture – 2007 Evidence

   Peer popularity and grade point averages
   All students come to school valuing achievement – what happens?
   Culture within the staff and faculty – nurture the champions

5. Change Killers

   Toxic Feedback
   Hierarchy
   Blame

6. Tools for Change

   Planning, Implementation, and Monitoring – PIM™
   Leadership Maps™
   Differentiated Professional Development
   Holistic Accountability

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Leading to Change / Preventing 1,000 Failures

Douglas Reeves

What would preventing 1,000 course failures mean for your school system? For administrators, it would mean 1,000 fewer repeated courses that have to be worked into students' schedules. For teachers, it would mean hundreds of students who are more likely to be motivated and engaged instead of angry, disengaged, and discouraged. Most important, for students, it would mean an opportunity to learn that persisting, listening to teacher feedback, and working hard do make a difference. It would mean the chance to say with confidence, “I am a successful student.”

The teachers and leadership of Ben Davis High School in Indianapolis, Indiana, engaged in a “no failure” campaign in spring 2006 and reduced the number of course failures by an astounding 1,006 compared with the previous year. This comprehensive high school serving more than 3,000 students has a student population that includes 43 percent minority students, 9 percent English language learners, and 45 percent students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. Student mobility is on the rise, and the number of low-income and second-language students is growing. The teachers are dedicated and hardworking, but they had those characteristics long before the school's dramatic reduction in student failures. How did teachers and school leaders prevent student failures? According to Principal Joel McKinney, seven strategies were the key.

Early, frequent, and decisive intervention. “Every three weeks throughout the school year, teachers give us the names of students who are at risk of failure,” explains McKinney. “We use this information to give students personalized assistance and avoid failures.” Teachers, counselors, and administrators meet with the student and parents to arrange support, ranging from assistance with homework to basic literacy tutoring to instruction in time management and guidance in keeping an assignment notebook.

At Ben Davis, teachers identify students' reading challenges immediately. All incoming students receive a reading assessment. It takes less than one half-hour and tells counselors immediately whether a student needs help in reading.

Personal connection with struggling students. Within weeks of the beginning of each semester, teachers at Ben Davis know which students are at risk of failure. The faculty of this large high
school has learned to “think small” as teachers, counselors, and administrators meet with students individually and enter into learning contracts with them. Students meet regularly with counselors and academic coaches who provide support, guidance, and most of all, the clear signal that adults in the school care about them as individuals.

**Parent connections.** Rather than wait for a course failure to meet with parents, school officials contact parents or guardians as soon as a student has been identified as at risk of a course failure, and they schedule individual meetings to plan for additional support.

**Tutoring, both personal and electronic.** In addition to providing personal connections with teachers, paraprofessionals, and peers, the district has enjoyed some success with Web-based programs that score student writing. Such programs take advantage of what Jeff Howard of the Efficacy Institute has described as the “Nintendo Effect”: Kids respond to feedback from electronic games because that feedback is immediate, accurate, and incremental. When students receive a rating of 2 on their electronically scored essay, they are as eager to submit a revised essay as they would be to get to the next level in a video game. Computerized scoring will never replace teachers, but education leaders can leverage teachers' time by making maximum use of technology.

**Managing students’ choices with decisive curriculum interventions.** Although educators' respect for students and parents is evident, this high school has put into place the radical notion that the adult professionals are in charge of the curriculum. Principal McKinney insists that students “can make a lot of choices, but we won't let them choose to fail.” Administrators change student schedules in the middle of the semester if necessary to provide additional instruction, intervention, and assistance to students in need.

**In-school assistance.** Many high school students have jobs, and some live in homes where parents are distracted and exhausted at the end of the day. Even when parents are deeply committed to the education of their children, by the time students are in secondary school they are largely making their own choices about homework, commitment, planning, and follow-through. Therefore, Ben Davis does not rely exclusively on after-school or summer school programs to intervene with students in danger of failure; instead, the school provides daily intervention and support.

**Reformed grading systems.** The Ben Davis staff is well versed in the research on student feedback, grading, and motivation. This research provides abundant evidence that grading systems are only effective if they are accurate, fair, and timely (Guskey & Bailey, 2001; Marzano, 2000; Reeves, 2004). At Ben Davis, teachers have largely eliminated the use of a zero grade, the inappropriate use of averages, and the assignment of poor grades as punishment. They know that it is not how students start each semester that counts, but how they finish.

Ben Davis is hardly alone in grading reforms. In Douglas County, Colorado, for example, the middle school grading policy explicitly states that later grades have more weight than earlier grades. A growing number of schools differentiate between academic proficiency and work habits because they recognize that students can be proficient in math and deficient in work
habits; and students can be delightful, compliant, and sociable, yet deficient in math.

The literature on high school reform is full of exaggerated claims and breathless enthusiasm for the latest silver bullet. In contrast, educators at Ben Davis—and at many other schools—are developing solid, comprehensive programs based on research, hard work, and the determination that no student will slip through the cracks. As Principal McKinney notes, “It just works.”

References


Author’s note: Your stories of leadership for change are always welcome. Please e-mail your contributions to DReeves@LeadAndLearn.com.

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Leading to Change / How Do You Change School Culture?

Douglas Reeves

Consider the following laments that I have heard recently from school leaders: “We can't change the grading policy—it's part of our culture.” “Public displays of data won't work here—the culture won't allow it.” “The parents just don't understand—you can't change the culture by passing a law.” Each of these statements includes the word culture, but the meaning of the term ranges from policies and procedures to personal preferences to deeply embedded belief systems.

Cultural change, although challenging and time-consuming, is not only possible but necessary—especially in organizations in which stakeholders use the word “culture” as a rhetorical talisman to block leadership initiatives, stifle innovation, and maintain the status quo. In the last decade, the education standards movement has taught us that policy change without cultural change is an exercise in futility and frustration.

How do you change the culture of schools? When it comes to lasting cultural change, four essentials are consistent across many leadership contexts.

First, define what you will not change. Identify specific values, traditions, and relationships that you will preserve. Rather than make every change a battle that exhausts political capital and diminishes trust, effective leaders place change in the context of stability. They take care not to convey the message, “Everything you have been doing in the past was ineffective, and your experience and professional judgment are irrelevant.” A more thoughtful message is, “I am only going to ask you to engage in changes that will have meaning and value for you and every stakeholder we serve.” For example, many schools have cherished traditions of excellence in athletics, music, or art—traditions that can be threatened when the leader says that academic achievement must be the top priority. Effective change leaders identify and build on traditions rather than compete with them. The trophy case bursting with evidence of athletic championships can share space with exceptional student artwork, outstanding science projects, and superb essays.

Second, recognize the importance of actions. Speeches and announcements are not enough. To lead challenging reform efforts, you must be willing to make personal changes in decision-making policies (Who has the authority to decide what?); personal time allocation (Which
meeting invitations do you accept and which do you decline?); and collegial relationships (Do you make time to listen to the personal stories of your colleagues?).

The greatest impediment to meaningful cultural change is the gap between what leaders say they value and what they actually do. Staff members are not seduced by a leader’s claim of “collaborative culture” when every meeting is a series of lectures, announcements, and warnings. Claims about a “culture of high expectations” are undermined when school policies encourage good grades for poor student work. The “culture of respect” is undermined by every imperious, demanding, or angry e-mail and voice mail coming from the principal. Leaders speak most clearly with their actions. When staff members hear the call for transformation from a leader whose personal actions remain unchanged, their hope turns to cynicism.

Third, use the right change tools for your school or district. Christensen, Marx, and Stevenson (2006) differentiate culture tools, such as rituals and traditions; power tools, such as threats and coercion; management tools, such as training, procedures, and measurement systems; and leadership tools, such as role modeling and vision. Leaders must choose the appropriate change tools on the basis of a combination of factors, including the extent to which staff members agree on what they want and how to get there. Leaders who approach reform determined to apply a particular change method are making the mistake of the person holding a hammer who therefore sees only nails.

Fourth, be willing to do the "scut work." In Mountains Beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer, a Man Who Would Cure the World, Tracy Kidder (2004) describes a renowned infectious disease specialist and leader in international health care. Farmer has revolutionized the beliefs and practices of stakeholders ranging from the poorest rural villagers in Haiti to the faculty of Harvard Medical School to policymakers at the United Nations. Combining his extensive field experience with sophisticated research and medical analyses, Farmer has upended traditional notions of health care. What does Farmer cite as one of his secrets? The willingness to do “unglamorous scut work.”

Although education leaders must make speeches and attend board meetings, leaders aspiring to change school cultures will take the risk, as Superintendent Stan Scheer of Murrieta Valley Unified School District in California has done, of taking a turn as a substitute teacher or spending time with bus drivers at 5:00 on a frosty morning. When the school leader puts down the briefcase and picks up a stack of trays in the cafeteria or a pile of writing portfolios for personal review, then everyone knows that the leader takes every job in the school seriously. If you believe that every job has value and there is no such thing as unimportant work in schools, then demonstrate that belief through your actions.

Meaningful school improvement begins with cultural change—and cultural change begins with the school leader.

References


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