

Three school improvement mistakes (and how to avoid them)

By Bryan Goodwin and Ceri Dean

Despite having well-intentioned, thoughtful improvement plans, many schools still struggle to raise student performance—often because their improvement efforts are doomed to failure from the very start by three common, yet avoidable, mistakes.

Mistake #1: Treating the symptoms, not the underlying problem

Everyone knows cough syrup doesn't cure you; it just treats your symptoms. But all too often, like cough syrup, school improvement plans attempt to treat the symptoms, but not the root causes of low student achievement. For example, if a school's data show that it has an unacceptably low number of students who are proficient in reading, it can be easy to rush to a solution, such as, creating 90-minute literacy blocks to provide additional time for reading instruction. But what if the real issue is something deeper—such as widespread, low expectations for student performance? Will a 90-minute literacy block really provide the cure?

Herein lies the rub with data-driven decision making. Data are no more instructive than tea leaves. Schools must dig below the surface to get at the real issues and address them head-on rather than serving up a “cocktail” of symptom-treating medications. Digging beneath the surface of school-level data might reveal, for example, that most teachers haven't actually implemented the school's reading program and are unwittingly using a “chicken feed” approach to teaching, throwing out knowledge to students, expecting some will get it and others won't. Providing more time for reading instruction might help, but it probably won't create the desired effect until teachers are aware of their practices and know how to change their teaching

strategies. To achieve that, the school needs to focus on building a culture of high expectations for teachers and students alike.

Mistake #2: Focusing only on tangibles and ignoring intangibles

Digging deeper into data often reveals that school culture, teacher attitudes and beliefs, and other norms and values are at the heart of low school performance. Indeed, as reported on page 5, McREL research suggests that a key distinction between high- and low-performing schools is that high-performing schools work to create a “culture of high expectations.” Similarly, in our own Balanced Leadership™ reports and program for school leaders, we refer to the importance of creating a “purposeful community,” one that comes together around a clear focus and does what it takes to accomplish its goals.

In an era of accountability, culture and climate may seem like “soft” concerns that are disconnected to pressing needs to demonstrate gains with “hard” data, such as student achievement scores. Our research and experience in working with schools suggests that addressing soft issues such as culture, environment, attitudes and beliefs, are at the heart of every successful improvement effort. By some estimates, up to 85 percent of publicly traded companies market value is related to intangible assets, namely the

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¹Weatherly, L.A. (2003). The value of people: The challenges and opportunities of human capital measurement and reporting. *SHRM Research Quarterly*.

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talents, dispositions, and ideas of its employees.¹ As a similar metric likely applies to the value schools bring to student learning, improvement efforts should focus on not just *tangible* assets, but also (and perhaps more importantly) *intangible* assets.

Mistake #3: Biting off more than you can chew

We recently examined several improvement plans from around the country and found that most plans focus not on one or two clearly defined efforts, but rather sweeping efforts with multiple goals and several action items related to each goal. Indeed, some plans we reviewed identified 30–40 actions for a single year—that’s one per week! That’s far too many initiatives for school faculty and staff to keep in their heads or take seriously. As a result, usually very little happens.

One way for schools to focus their efforts with a “less-is-more” approach is to engage in a “fractal experience” (See p. 10). A fractal experience is a small-scale, short-term change effort that follows a systematic process. This process includes defining the problem and finding the right solution, implementing and monitoring the effectiveness of the solution, and reflecting on the process to identify those actions and structures that contributed to the success of the effort. The fractal experience helps schools focus on a small change while they are learning how to be disciplined about the process of change. We call this change effort a “fractal” because the systematic process stays the same no matter how big or small the change. This means that if the change initiative is complex, and there are several smaller change initiatives embedded in it, each of those change initiatives would be governed by the same change process. The quick wins that are

possible with fractal experiences encourage schools to undertake ever more complex and substantive improvement efforts that have the dramatic effect of transforming a school’s culture.

In short, rather than attempting to do many things and doing none of them well, schools should identify the one or two meaningful things they will do *next*. And when they are in the process of doing

this, they must not overlook culture. By paying attention to both technical processes as well as issues related to school culture, they will eventually find that their improvement efforts have become comprehensive and systemic. In our report *Success in Sight: A Comprehensive Approach to School Improvement*, we

refer to the approach of taking one step at a time as “thinking systemically and acting systematically.”

Learn from your mistakes

In Japan, successful companies, such as Toyota, adhere to the concept of “kaizen”—that is, the continuous process of taking frequent and small steps on the path to improvement. Kaizen declares that “every defect is a treasure”—that is, making and uncovering mistakes is all part of the improvement process. In their own improvement efforts, schools should be thoughtful and intentional and give 100 percent to the effort, yet be willing to learn from their mistakes. In the end, the only real improvement mistake a school can make is to do nothing at all. **CS**

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