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10 School-Based Strategies for Student Success

By
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Abstract:

To enhance student learning, implement positive school-wide changes that effectively support teachers and principals.

Text:

Imagine a school where principals are focusing on advancing their careers and teachers are just “putting in their time” awaiting retirement or transferring to a school with a better reputation or in a safer neighborhood. Or, imagine a school where parents use schools more for babysitting their children than for educating them. Or, imagine an underfunded school with paint peeling off walls, radiators inadequately heating classrooms, and rain coming through ceilings because of holes in the roofs. Whenever situations like these exist, student learning fails to serve as the central mission. If public education is to fulfill the expectations of governments, parents, and society in general, these scenarios must be replaced by principals and teachers who are prepared for and dedicated to student learning. Also needed are the engagement of parents in their children's education and sufficient fiscal and human resources to ensure welcoming, comfortable, and safe environments conducive to learning.

The person most critical to the success of teachers is the building principal (Murphy 2002; Marzano, Waters, and McNulty 2005). The person most critical to student learning is the teacher (Marzano, Pickering, and Pollock 2001). Too often, though, principals and teachers lack the time, resources, and sometimes the skills and abilities to focus on student learning. Principals and teachers in schools with limited financial and human resources may feel especially challenged. Principals and teachers are more likely to implement positive changes when they have adults providing assistance, receive financial support from new sources, employ creative approaches, and implement steps that have proven successful in other schools. The following 10 strategies, along with specific implementation steps, have been used in various types of schools and offer principals and teachers concrete ways to enhance student learning.

1. Engage parents as active partners in facilitating student achievement.

The right kinds of parental involvement in schools, according to Perkins-Gough (2008), can boost student achievement. She reported on a Council of Urban Boards of Education study of 10,270 parents in 112 urban school districts. The findings affirmed “the importance of building direct, personal relationships with parents to strength their support and increase their involvement in their child’s education” (Perkins-Gough 2008, 90). To reinforce this point, Varela (2008) urged school communities to embrace multiculturalism so parents of immigrant children would feel welcome to get involved with their children’s education. To further emphasize the importance of parental involvement in schools, the Maryland Department of Education offers an awards program to recognize parents who make significant contributions to schools (Jacobson 2008). Possible implementation steps to facilitate parent involvement leading to higher student achievement could include the following:

- a. Establish parental advisory groups to work with principals and teachers to expand and enrich learning opportunities for students. These groups could meet following each grading period, with refreshments donated by a local business, to discuss ways to enhance learning opportunities for students needing remediation or tutoring, explore possibilities for more advanced academic challenges, or identify more engaging content or instructional approaches.
- b. Conduct an annual orientation session where educators help parents learn how they can better support their children’s education. These sessions could help bridge the gap between school personnel and parents to improve communication, such as by exchanging telephone numbers, introducing a school Web site where up-to-date information is posted, or scheduling home visits by teachers to each student’s home, when this is allowed by district policy.
- c. Encourage parents to get actively engaged in their children’s learning, such as through jointly completed homework assignments, parent-student learning sessions at school in the evenings or on weekends, and parents’ volunteering to work with students at school.
- d. Make schools welcoming places for parents, such as by having a room where parents can meet with teachers or the principal, or complete volunteer services for the schools.

Because some parents may choose not to support schools in their work to educate children, an alternative approach could be:

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- e. Find another family member—such as a grandparent, adult sibling, uncle, or aunt, or a member of the community, perhaps someone identified by the student—who would be willing to become a surrogate parent and engage in one or more of the preceding implementation steps.

2. Solicit businesses to support educational goals through an “adopt a school” program.

Through an adopt-a-school program in Texas, businesses are encouraged to donate materials, provide guest speakers, and supply funding (Patterson 2002). In another example, a business, organization, or individual through a contribution of \$500 sponsors each of 44 classrooms in a Florida school. Teachers use these funds to purchase items needed to support instruction (American Federation of Teachers 2004). Truell (2008) described the benefit of work experiences and job shadowing. Possible implementation steps to encourage businesses to support schools could include the following:

- a. Invite local businesses to provide financial support to their adopted schools, such as by funding computer labs, providing books to children lacking books at home, or supplying playground or fitness equipment.
- b. Encourage businesses to reward their employees for serving as guest speakers and volunteering in adopted schools.
- c. Engage students in shadowing experiences with employees in partner businesses.

In small towns without extensive community resources, other implementation steps could be:

- d. Develop a “sister school” program with a larger school district in the state so that students could periodically visit this school and take advantage of their resources.
- e. Work with the state department of education to identify grant funds that would be obtained to provide instructional technologies or other learning materials.

3. Initiate a program matching senior citizens with students.

Rankin (2006) described a tutoring program provided by senior citizens, high school students, and parents for middle school students in Washington to help them improve their reading skills. A senior citizen group in Missouri provided a tutoring program to help elementary school students with their

reading and writing skills as well as to give seniors opportunities to share life experiences with children (Senior Citizens 1999). This Intergenerational Tutoring Program has since been adopted by approximately 80 other school districts. Possible implementation steps to encourage senior citizens to help students learn could include the following:

- a. Make opportunities available for senior citizens where, under the supervision of the classroom teacher during school time, they work one-on-one with students who are struggling academically to help them learn basic reading, mathematics, and other content knowledge.
- b. Encourage senior citizens to listen to students' expressions of joys, sorrows, hopes, and fears, which are more likely to occur in a comfortable environment and after friendships are formed. Offering a few refreshments encourages building rapport.
- c. Encourage a community service organization to provide opportunities for students of all ages to interact socially with senior citizens and learn about their life experiences.

4. Use paraprofessionals or volunteers (e.g., senior citizens or business volunteers) to monitor lunchrooms, bus arrivals and departures, and playgrounds or campus grounds.

Viadero (2008), based on a review of several studies, discussed how working conditions—more than pay—impact the recruiting and retention of teachers. Working conditions include having time to reflect and reenergize for teaching while not being saddled with non-instructional duties. Teachers will be able to maximize use of this time to work one-on-one with students needing additional instruction, plan for the enhancement of class and individualized instruction, and recharge their energy levels so they can be more effective in teaching. Possible implementation steps to provide additional instructional time to teachers could include the following:

- a. Train noncertified personnel in the scope of their duties, such as where to stand, how to monitor students' behaviors, and what actions should and should not be taken.
- b. Provide overall supervision while noncertified personnel carry out their work.

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- c. Ensure that noncertified personnel, to prevent a litigious situation, understand the procedures for dealing with emergency, threatening, or dangerous actions or events.

5. Provide a mentor or support teacher to every new teacher during the first two years of employment.

Mentoring helps address the problem of teacher retention (Leimann, Murdock, and Waller 2008). Essential for a successful mentoring program, however, is having highly skilled mentors providing one-on-one support for new teachers. Trubowitz (2004) provided advice about how to mentor new teachers, with special emphasis on mutually beneficial relationships for new teachers and their mentors. Possible components of a successful mentoring program could include the following:

- a. Give mentors release time so they can help new teachers make smooth transitions from academic studies into the realities of today's classrooms. If a school district lacks the resources to provide mentors with release time, assigned support teachers—even with little dedicated time—still could provide a listening ear and professional assistance to help new teachers.
- b. Assist mentors or support teachers in providing instructional guidance, especially in areas where a new teacher is struggling. Because the support teacher will have less time to dedicate to helping the new teacher, this person could be one who teaches in the same subject area or has a classroom close by the new teacher.
- c. Give opportunities for mentor/teacher dyads or support teacher/new teacher pairs to interact socially, thus creating a support network to help address retention issues in the teaching profession. Local businesses may be willing to provide coupons for free or reduced meals or beverages to help facilitate these social interactions.

6. Establish professional learning communities through which teachers and principals share instructional content, strategies, and assessments.

Honawar (2008) described the professional learning community at one high school in Illinois. For more than 25 years, teachers at this extraordinary school have met in teams to

develop assessments, lesson plans, and instructional improvement strategies. Through this professional learning community, teachers willingly dedicate after-school time to help improve their practice. Learning communities including teachers and principals can collaborate in improving student achievement (Baron 2008). Working together, these professionals establish and share student learning goals, collaboratively improve teaching practices, enhance curricula, and address school-wide issues affecting student achievement. The principal serves as the facilitative leader in learning communities in transforming the curricula and assessments in schools. Possible benefits of learning communities could include the following:

- a. Develop and nurture a school culture valuing collaboration and shared lesson plans, instructional strategies, and assessments.
- b. Provide compensated time weekly and during the summer to facilitate teacher-to-teacher interactions and professional growth.
- c. Recognize and celebrate collaborative efforts to enhance student learning.

Should any teachers and principals lack the knowledge, skills, and abilities to function effectively in professional learning communities, additional steps could be:

- d. Provide mentors for teachers and coaches for principals who can help them further develop their competence in instructional content, teaching strategies, and assessments.
- e. Give incentives to teachers and principals to increase their participation in professional development sessions or take advanced coursework specifically related to instruction.
- f. Improve the quality of professional development at the school and district levels to help teachers and principals enhance their knowledge, skills, and abilities associated with increasing student learning.

7. Replace district-based or school-specific, one-shot, and generic professional development sessions with teacher-planned, teacher-led, focused, and ongoing professional growth opportunities.

The National Staff Development Council, according to McAdamis (2008), suggested that every teacher is more effective when professional learning occurs on a daily basis. Kinney (2008) described one effective professional development activity, called “data fairs,” that

encourages teachers to share their best instructional practices through an ongoing process for improving student achievement. Teachers at a high school in New York benefit from a professional development collaborative model prompting teacher dialogue, planning, and reflection, and involving teachers during weekly meetings in planning curricula and establishing common benchmarks for their classes (Perez-Katz 2007). Penuel et al. (2007) described a sample of 454 teachers and 28 professional development providers who served them in an inquiry science program. They reported teachers' perceptions that the coherence is vitally important between professional development experiences and the implementation of curricula. Ongoing, focused professional development could include the following:

- a. Offer time for teachers to share effective learning strategies directly related to their daily instructional practices
- b. Support financially and provide time for professional development opportunities for teachers.
- c. Provide compensation to teachers who share expertise in professional development sessions for other teachers.
- d. Allow teachers to observe and learn from the teaching of the best teachers in a school or within a district.

8. Provide daily classes taught by certified physical educators.

In 1987, U.S. Congressional Resolution 97 encouraged educational agencies and state governments to provide quality, daily physical education for all K–12 students. In 1996, the Surgeon General's report on *Physical Activity and Health* (1996) found daily enrollment in physical education programs had declined to only 25 percent of school students. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2008) called for daily physical activity, which can be met through daily school programs. Regular physical activity has been shown to contribute to health and increased alertness contributing to enhanced learning in classes. Regular physical activity could include the following:

- a. Engage students in learning motor and sport skills and being more physically active, which in turn will lead to their becoming more attentive learners.

- b. Enable teachers to use additional time to plan instruction individually or collaboratively with other teachers.

9. Free principals from as much administrative minutia as possible.

Within 10 recommendations of Parsons (2001) are ways to get control of paperwork and other strategies to increase the effectiveness of principals. Brown, Corkill, and Tucker (2006) offered 25 tips to principals they can use to decrease the time demands of their position while also helping to increase student learning. Boone, Hartzman, and Mero (2006) described how one principal reorganized his administrative duties and daily practice so he could focus on providing instructional leadership, professional development, and coaching for teachers two hours each day. These changes have transformed his school into a model for caring teachers, quality instruction, and enhanced student learning. As these examples illustrate, principals can change how they spend their time to benefit teachers, students, and themselves. Following are some ways to implement this change in administrative duties:

- a. Use staff members or volunteers to monitor hallways, keep records, and handle routine tasks.
- b. Eliminate time-consuming meetings by enhancing electronic communication with teachers, other school personnel, and parents.
- c. Provide principals with the time each day to serve as instructional leaders to work with individual teachers and teams of teachers to increase student learning.
- d. Set aside time each week for principals to enhance their knowledge in instructional leadership.

10. Substitute district-based, one-shot, and generic professional development sessions for principals with leader coaches.

An increasing number of states, according to Archer (2006), are providing coaching for principals to help them develop skills and abilities as educational leaders. Samuels (2008) described a new initiative in Pittsburgh for the development of principals. One vital component of this program is coaching. An independent school principal described his experiences and improvements working with an executive coach (Grace 2005). Providing leader coaches to principals could include the following implementation steps:

- a. Provide leader coaches, at no cost to principals, who can help principals deal with leadership, management, and instructional challenges facing them.
- b. Offer principals compensated time during the school year and summer to further develop instructional leadership skills.

Closing Comments

These strategies and implementation steps have the potential to help teachers make greater differences in student learning and to help principals prepare for and have the time to serve as instructional leaders. If all schools were to implement many of these strategies, learning opportunities for students would be positively affected. The learning of children and their future depend on how effectively teachers teach and principals serve as instructional leaders.

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