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## The Best Way to Lead Them

**Principals can cultivate learning communities in their schools when they lead with intentionality and heart.**

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Asked how standards-based reform had affected her school, teachers, and students, elementary school principal Ms. Powers replied:

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You can look around at other schools—even in our district—and people would say, "These kids are poor. You need to just love them. That's the best we can do for them." Or you can come to a school like this where the philosophy is [that] the best way to love them is to give them an education so that they can make choices about their lives.

For the past two years, we've re-searched schools that have excelled in the face of statewide reform in Washington State. We have found that principals are the key players in schools that ensure an excellent education for their students (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991; Wolf, Borko, Elliot, & McIver, 2000). Principals determine whether and how to implement standards. They decide what to emphasize and what to omit.

Our research led us to two successful Washington State elementary school principals. Ms. Powers was the principal of Beacon Elementary, an urban school with a high population of immigrant students from the former Soviet Bloc countries. Up to 90 percent of the students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches. Ms. Glen was the principal of Emerald Elementary, a diverse suburban school. Fifteen languages other than English were spoken in the school, and 68 percent of students qualified for free or reduced-price lunches. Emerald also housed the deaf and hard-of-hearing program for the district and beyond.

We listened closely to Ms. Powers and Ms. Glen,<sup>1</sup> who spoke about leading with intentionality and heart as the way to implement the standards in their schools. Ms. Glen used the word *intentionality* repeatedly, stressing the need for "intentional teaching [to] keep the focus" on the Washington State reform. We equate intentionality with what theorists have labeled focus (Evans, 1996) and purpose (Sergiovanni, 1996). Thus, successful principals work intentionally with their faculties to increase student learning.

Both Ms. Powers and Ms. Glen also emphasized *heart*. Evans (1996) argues that

Leadership begins at one's center: *authentic leaders build their practice outward*

*from their core commitments, rather than inward from a management text.* (p. 193, emphasis in the original)

Through intentionality and heart, these principals set an effective as well as affective course in their schools—they shared governance with their teachers, who in turn worked together to improve student achievement.

In our school visits, we observed classes and interviewed the principals, faculty members, and students. During these conversations and observations, we found that the principals balanced intentionality and heart to achieve success in their schools by creating effective learning environments, cultivating a professional community, setting goals for reform, and balancing pressure and support.

### **Creating Environments for Learning**

One of the first actions that Ms. Glen took when she arrived as a new principal at Emerald was to start gardening. She raked the grounds and filled planters with flowers—effectively exemplifying her willingness to pitch in and do whatever was necessary to make the school a welcoming place. Soon other faculty members, parents, and students joined her, and the garden became a site for special school celebrations. Ms. Glen explained, "The environment is a big part of how people perceive a place. When people walk up here, what do they see?" On our visits, we saw a school notable for its beautiful surroundings—not only its gardens but also clean, well-lighted places inside the school for students to learn.

In the case of our urban school, gardening took a much more serious turn: Beacon sat across the street from a vacant lot that had been used as a toxic waste dump. Fortunately, Beacon's parent decision-making body also served as the neighborhood council. With strong parental support and the school at the heart of the community, the council garnered Environmental Protection Agency Superfunds to clean up the lot. Currently, there are plans to build a sports complex on the site, which will give the Beacon neighborhood children a place to play.

### **Cultivating a Professional Community**

Principals must also create an environment in which teachers collaborate, exchange ideas, and develop tight collegial connections—and in which principals share governance with their staff members (Evans, 1996; Sergiovanni, 1996). At Beacon, all teachers participated on action teams; action team leaders served as the school's decision-making implementation team. Action team proposals were presented to the implementation team, who discussed their feasibility before taking them back to the faculty for group consensus.

At Emerald, Ms. Glen established a similar structure. She met monthly with a learning team—a core group of six teachers who reflected on schoolwide issues. One of the key functions of the learning team was to plan the annual retreat that Ms. Glen had initiated when she came to Emerald.

Intentionality and heart were woven throughout these schools' shared governance structures. The implementation and learning teams made deliberate and considerate decisions with the rest of the faculty because they well understood that commitment to new ideas is more certain when teachers are part of the decision-making process (Sarason, 1996).

## Setting Goals for Reform

Schools need vision to accomplish reform goals. Schlechty (1990) notes that "visions are intended realities" that reinforce the school's focus (p. 89). For Ms. Powers, the intended reality was that her students could do what privileged students do:

I think what they expect us to do is pretty minimal in a school like mine. [But the students] are doing well above what anybody would expect them to do.

Evans (1996) identified three necessary conditions to achieving vision: clarity, focus, and continuity. For Ms. Powers, clarity came from both the Essential Academic Learning Requirements (Washington State's standards, also known as the EALRs or Essential Learnings) and the annual Washington Assessment of Student Learning scores. Such a focus helped Ms. Powers know what to emphasize:

It wasn't the state telling us, but it was us thinking about how we get to the state's goals, but in [our] own way—what's right for us at Beacon.

At Emerald, Ms. Glen charged her learning team with preparing for the annual retreat, at which she stressed the school's state assessment results:

During those two days, there were intense breakout sessions with groups of teachers talking about the test scores. . . . We pinpointed the areas from that data that showed our strengths and weaknesses . . . and said, "OK, it looks like these are the things we are going to need to focus on."

Evans (1996) suggests that continuity, the third characteristic of vision, bridges the present and the intended reality. Continuity provides a cushion for the inevitable uncertainty generated by the demands of change. Keeping their emphasis on student learning enabled both principals to hold fast to their goals.

## Balancing Pressure and Support

Creating an effective environment, cultivating a professional community, and setting goals are the prerequisites of implementation—the doing. Yet implementation of reform also requires both "pressure and support" (Fullan & Stiegelbauer, 1991, p. 91). In Washington State, external pressure came from state-mandated reform. Both principals became the internal catalysts for reform in their schools. Ms. Powers introduced changes gradually, noting, "My role is to be sure [that the teachers are] teaching to those targets."

Gradual pressure was Ms. Glen's approach as well. She told us,

I've been able to lead the group without saying, "You will do this." It's more showing them different examples, different reasons, and suggest[ing] things. I just had to really be careful on how much I loaded the plates.

But even gradual pressure without support can seem relentless (Borko, Elliot, & Uchiyama, in press). Ms. Powers eased the pace by providing resources, managing the budget, and offering focused professional development. Most important, she used school funds to hire facilitators—certified teachers—to teach other teachers. She explained,

Building capacity of classroom teachers is the only way you're going to reach all

those kids. If you target teachers in improving their instructional skills . . . then you're affecting *all* the kids in that classroom and that teacher in a much more profound way.

Ms. Glen also worked carefully and creatively to get the most from Emerald's budget. When money was tight, she volunteered her school to participate in pilot programs, including the district's new report card system, to help her teachers receive even more training. She told us, "If they're not sure how to do something, we'll get the training." As a former special education resource teacher, she knew how to teach reading and often provided professional advice to individual teachers in cognitive coaching sessions as well as in larger faculty meetings.

Both principals helped their faculties focus on the picture of their progress by continually returning to their students' scores on state tests to analyze strengths and weaknesses. Ms. Powers pointed to a bulletin board in her office:

That's my wall of graphs, every grade level's goal . . . , where they ended the year and if they met their goal . . . and what the new goal is. That's part of the data piece for us. When you can say, "Look! We're getting closer. Look at the successes," then [the teachers] are willing to keep going. . . . They want kids to learn.

### **Achieving the Vision Through Head and Heart**

If increasing student learning was the goal of both principals, how did they know when they had arrived? The proof came with the annual announcement of the state's assessment scores. The spring 2000 scores for both Beacon and Emerald increased from the previous year—one more in a succession of increases from 1996–2000. Seventy-one percent of Beacon students met or surpassed standards in mathematics, up from 11 percent in 1995. Beacon students excelled in reading as well: 65 percent of students met or surpassed reading standards, up from 27 percent. With confidence, Ms. Powers announced, "Scores went up. We're there! It's not an anomaly. We can do this!" Ironically, both the newspaper and television reporters who visited Beacon reported the scores incorrectly. Ms. Powers declared with a laugh, "If they need to learn to read and write and do math, they can just come here!"

Assessment scores also increased at Emerald. Sixty-seven percent of Emerald students met or exceeded reading standards (up from 44 percent), and 50 percent of them met or surpassed math standards (up from 7.9 percent). Ms. Glen told us, "I'm so psyched. I attribute so much to the intentional teaching." But the school's faculty and students attributed much to Ms. Glen because her intentional leadership had always been balanced with heart.

On our last visit, we stopped to read a poster that Emerald students had created in tribute to their principal. The students thanked her for her kindness and for "making our school a better place to be in a safe environment." One student summed up his principal's efforts: "I'm thankful for Ms. Glen for encouraging us for the [state test] . . . and [she] has a kind heart." The student's words reiterate the idea, expressed by Ms. Powers, that providing an excellent education for all students is, without a doubt, "the best way to love them."

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The names of the principals and their schools have been changed.

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