



Getting Off the Hamster Wheel

BY GRACE SAMMON

Imagine that you have all you need to make your high school reform agenda succeed—money from the Gates Foundation, a Smaller Learning Community grant from the U.S. Department of Education, a redesigned school building, a student population of 700 students, a superintendent committed to high school improvement as the center piece of the district’s reforms, and a supportive leadership committee. You are focused on just three things: creating small, supportive, personalized environments for students; ensuring academic rigor in every classroom; and developing effective leadership and instructional practices. You are at what Malcolm Gladwell in his book *The Tipping Point* (2002) calls, well, a tipping point. You believe that you can “create the magical moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire.”

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PREVIEW

Even with all the external elements of school reform in place, educators can end up spinning their wheels.

To make progress, schools must identify their nonnegotiable key elements and use the habits of highly effective schools to turn reform plans into school practice.

This is not a mythical scenario: In May 2003, I worked with a school team in this exact setting. We met tirelessly for five weeks. We worked hard. We imagined, argued, planned, fought, and studied. We had meeting minutes; printed agendas; handouts; e-mail messages; a library of resources; a paid facilitator; School Reform Committee binders; and most important, snacks.

In week five, however, I realized we also had made no progress. We continued to rehash old decisions; brought new folks up-to-date; and rethought, rediscussed, and refought old battles. We fretted about football teams and chorus more than the students' needs and the quality of instruction. We had not gotten to the deeper discussions about academic achievement, professional community, and data-driven decisions.

In a moment of clarity, I realized we were in the process of simply creating a smaller version of the larger school that once existed. We were running in place, not making progress. If I closed my eyes, I could almost hear the hamster wheel spinning. Sadly, the hamster wheel metaphor resonates with too many of the educators with whom I work. They are all grappling with how to make reform initiatives reform schools into the personalized, rigorous communities for teaching and learning that their mission statements tout them to be. Yet students across America continue to drop out and drift out in record numbers. This is at least in part because the education community's beliefs, policies, and practices have not helped schools meet with success. Some educators are suffering from what Arnold Fege calls "innovation fatigue." They are tired of the cycle of reforms that schools and districts chase in hope of a silver bullet for increasing test scores and changing school climate.

Putting Reform Into Practice

An effective change process is actually about committing to a process of continuous improvement in professional practice. Committing to a cycle of reform means having hard discussions and developing and practicing what I call the habits of highly effective schools. It may seem obvious, but the first step is to have a clear mission and vision for what you are trying to create. Many schools are working to create small learning communities (SLCs), for example, and SLCs

can be powerful places for teaching and learning, but without a clear mission and established criteria by which to measure daily practices against goals and priorities, educators don't know whether they are succeeding. Even in schools with well established SLCs, there is frequent confusion about the purpose and essential elements required for success. Having agreement on the key elements allows schools to establish nonnegotiables, the practices and philosophies that will be held sacred among the group. Nonnegotiables may include such things as equity for all students, common planning time for all teachers, a high expectations curriculum, and personalization that is palpable in the school building where student voice really matters.

For example, staff members may reach agreement that personalization is important to school reform and assume that they have a collective understanding of what that means, but getting the details of personalization in place requires understanding what Silva and Mackin (2002) talk about in *Standards of Mind and Heart*: "Personalization means more than talking to and caring about some students; it means creating formal structures that ensure all students receive personal care, attention, and support."

The second step must be to create an atmosphere and school culture that makes sense. In *Tough Love for School Reform*, Hess (2004) states, "Educational reformers routinely approach school improvement as a matter of technical expertise rather than common sense—undermining their own best efforts while distracting public attention and energy from the larger structural problems." I believe that what makes sense is establishing a process where the following habits can be nurtured, practiced, and become commonplace.

Demonstrate high expectations and a vision that matches them. Effective systems and schools are focused on the academic and personal development of students. There must be a belief at the classroom, school, district, and community level that all students can achieve at high levels and a commitment to all students getting a strong foundation in reading, writing, math, problem solving, and critical-thinking skills. Effective schools recognize that learning environments must provide an atmosphere in which students are known well and are respected by caring adults and are supported in their social and personal development. Effective schools create

meaningful mission and vision statements that reflect the expectations and call every staff member to a standard of performance excellence. That mission becomes the lifeblood of their school plans and operation.

Build capacity and create a true climate for success. Effective systems and schools are focused on a set of high expectations for their faculty members and school personnel. They set clear expectations for interactions with colleagues, students, and the community. They set a standard for involving staff members in professional learning communities that look at data, shared practices, and student work. They build the capacity among teachers and administrators to “risk success,” deliver high-quality instruction, lead and manage classrooms and schools, use data to document continuous improvement, and provide personal support to students in ways that can help them develop foundation skills and achieve at high levels. They set an agenda and then empower school leaders and teachers to meet it. Effective schools and systems reflect on the developmental needs of the individual staff members and the staff as a whole and provide opportunities for both individual and group growth. They create a staff development approach that makes sense in light of their district and school needs and the specific mission of the organization.

Think small and dream big. Effective schools are constantly seeking new opportunities for students and staff members to more effectively meet their mission. They believe that change and improvement is possible, and they commit to a process of study, reflection, and work. They ask the essential question, “What is the best structure and instructional approach to meet the needs of our students?” They create small schools, schools within schools, and personalized educational opportunities for students.

Effective schools understand that the pace of simply running a high school is demanding, that the pace will not slow down, and that they cannot wait for a “good time” to start their reform.

Engage in legitimate community support. Effective schools have widespread community support from business and community leaders, postsecondary educational institutions, social service agencies, private organizations, and families. They have worked effectively at establishing a shared vision, partnership, and a sense of shared accountability for the success of the school. They have managed to involve their stakeholders in the life of the school, giving them vitally important firsthand experience with students and teachers that makes the difference in both partner effectiveness and understanding school issues. Effective schools have developed habits that tie their partners to teachers and students in ways that build sustainability over time.

Thrive with strong, sustained, and shared leadership. Effective schools recruit and develop strong, sustained, stable leadership at all levels—district, school, classroom, and community. Such leaders understand that leadership is not defined by job description but by an active commitment to working toward continuous improvement and engaging the

entire community in that process. They share data in meaningful and straightforward ways so each teacher, student, family, and administrator can add to the vision, be engaged, and help implement reforms. They are honest. They ask the hard and essential questions. They are not complacent but are in and out of one another’s classrooms and offices to share work and best practices and offering suggestions for improvement. Good leaders accept accountability for seeing that the mission statement is alive and tangible in every aspect of the school.

Align and manage resources. Effective schools have aligned their multiple plans and reports to be reflected in just one plan that is directly linked to meeting their mission. Every person in that organization knows and can articulate the plan. Effective schools have in place a practice that assesses and aligns



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resources (and those who control them) to the mission of reform. They have learned to manage existing resources. Their budgeting and staffing reflects a commitment to their essential priorities. They have learned to use grant dollars in ways that free up monies from their general operating accounts. They have learned not to chase grant dollars and instead seek resources that support their mission. In working with consultants, effective schools align each consultant's work, hold them accountable for outcomes, and ensure that their efforts are directly linked to the essential mission of the school. Effective schools involve their faculty and union representatives in reform and keep them engaged in meaningful ways in the delivery of instruction and the management of the organization.

Understand time. Effective schools have created a sense of urgency for reform and have set a rigorous timeline. Effective schools understand that the pace of simply running a high school is demanding, that the pace will not slow down, and that they cannot wait for a "good time" to start their reform. These schools have in place practices that require a regular series of checks and balances to assess each teacher's, each student's, and the overall reform's progress. They have a sense of urgency, but they have ensured that the reforms were not just superficial efforts to "get the test scores up." Effective schools spend time in a

process of study and discovery; they create a meaningful, time-sensitive plan; and they stay the course.

Overcoming the Status Quo

The world of school reform is often filled with high hopes. It is also far too frequently filled with confusion about competing initiatives, tension, bruised egos, dysfunction, and a sense on the part of educators that they are being victimized and disrespected. Although none of those feelings are intended or comfortable, they might be worth the price if educators were seeing reforms that resulted in successful changes in school culture and positive outcomes for students. School leaders must battle the status quo and the low expectations that so many have for their schools and organizations. They must commit to developing the habits of effective schools. **PL**

References

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