

The Eight Don'ts of School Improvement and Their Solutions
Speech to the On the Right Track 4 symposium
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Text:

I am a pretty experienced speech giver. Since I became a superintendent in 1995 and later when I worked in the CSR program at the U.S. Department of Education, I have been asked to make presentations in many places. Most often I speak about the power of belief in successfully educating all kids or the latest research on high performing/high poverty schools. I love to talk about what can be done when dedicated and committed professional are of a like mind and have the will and the determination to reach and teach all kids.

But my invitation to speak here was different. Months ago I talked with Wendy Harris, Gordon Jackson and Linda Slayton. They asked me to keynote at "On the Right Track - 4", and I accepted. Then, they told me very specifically that they didn't want my speech to be about "what research says" or about "what good schools do" or even "what I believe". Instead, they wanted me to talk about what works, and more specifically, to talk about how to DO what works.

This struck me as a very bold and difficult request to honor, since I know what the On the Right Track symposium is about. Every year it brings together an awesome collection of practitioners from throughout the state to talk about what they have done and are doing to turn their schools and districts around. Presenters at this conference know what to do, and how to do it, because they ARE doing it. They are far better equipped to address this topic than I am, and I know you will have an opportunity over the course of the next two days to listen to and learn from them.

So, although I agreed to give this speech, since that phone call last winter I have thought long and hard about what I could possibly contribute to the picture of "how to do it." After thirty years of experience as a teacher, a principal, an assistant superintendent, and a superintendent, working in large districts and small, I should have collected a lot of wisdom that I could share. But honestly, after thirty years, I often think that I know a lot more about what NOT to do than anything else.

So, I've decided that a humble approach is best. I am going to talk to you about eight "don'ts" of school reform - things that should never be done if you're trying to improve schools, and what I've learned by making every single one of these mistakes in the course of my career.

Don't #1

Don't depend solely on the principal to lead the school.

As a superintendent I (and a former principal myself) I was convinced that a school was only as good as the principal running it. I hired and fired to find the “right” leader in our buildings. I expected that a good person, an outstanding principal, would be able to turn around a struggling school single handedly, and preferably overnight. I had read the research about the need in schools for strong leadership and defined leadership very narrowly. For me, a strong principal was a strong person with a considerable ego who would be organized and decisive.

My mistake?

I assumed that school leadership was a job for a single person, out in front, taking the hits, and accountable to me.

What would I do if I could do it again?

I would re-think what leadership means, and I would make sure that every person in the school saw himself and herself as a leader. Leadership doesn’t belong to the principal.

This is both a philosophical and a practical change for me. I’ve always respected and admired good teachers, but as an administrator I always thought my role was to get roadblocks out of their way so they could “just teach”: Build the schedule, assign classes, make decisions, and take care of the budget. I didn’t think any good teacher was interested in those things; he or she just wanted to be in the classroom with kids.

But I’ve come to realize over the years that teachers who are involved in leadership roles are actually better teachers. They are more engaged in their profession, more likely to innovate and experiment. They are more likely to feel responsible for the school’s success, and for the success of its kids. In the high performing high poverty schools highlighted by the Pritchard Foundation last year, all eight were found to have varied leadership styles and none of them had a particularly authoritarian principal. Instead the staff and teachers regularly participated in making important decisions that shaped the culture of the school.

There are all kinds of leadership roles for teachers, from speaking up at a faculty meeting to leading a discussion of student work, to chairing a committee to participating in interviewing and hiring other teachers. Good principals don’t protect teachers from leadership, they encourage them to exercise it.

This approach also changes the role of the principal. So many principals I’ve talked with in my career felt that the whole burden of improving the school fell on their shoulders. How much of that was ego and how much genuine leadership? At the time I didn’t think to ask. But I can look back now at one of the outstanding principals from the district where I was a superintendent, whose school was named a national Title I school last year, and realize that she knew what real leadership meant. I remember now that I rarely heard her talk about her school’s success without a teacher or two at her side. It was often they,

not she, who explained what their school plan said, or how the decision had been made to adopt the mathematics program they used. She led by encouraging leadership.

Don't #2

Don't rely on selection strategies alone to get good teachers.

As an urban superintendent, I was always on the lookout for outstanding “urban” teachers – those with the commitment and dedication to take on the challenge of teaching our kids. I thought I was so smart – I went to the Gallup organization (the people who do the Gallup polling) and contracted to use a screening instrument they developed that identified outstanding urban teachers. We used it with all of our teacher applicants. Before any teacher could even be interviewed in our district, he or she had to qualify through the screening process. We identified hundreds of teachers with high affect, strong dedication, and a desire to work in an urban setting, but found that many of them, after a short time, were as negative and pessimistic as those who had been in the district when I got there.

What was my mistake?

I paid a lot of attention to screening and hiring teachers, but not nearly enough to inducting them, mentoring them, and nurturing them. A good initial match just wasn't enough.

What would I do this time around?

I would pay more attention to follow through with new teachers. Where in the district were they hired to teach? What was the professional culture of the school? How were they assigned and scheduled? Were my schools following the traditional pattern of assigning the least experienced teachers to the most academically needy students and the most experienced teachers to upper level classes? How were they inducted when they got there? Did they learn everything there was to know in the teachers' lounge or was there a purposeful program of induction where school leadership explained to new teachers “who we are, what we believe in, and how we do business here”?

I never thought to ask these questions.

I would pay more attention to mentoring. Like most districts, we had a mentoring program. It was minimally funded through the state. Mentors volunteered, or were drafted, or got the job because they were the most senior staff. It wasn't purposeful. We didn't systematically identify outstanding mentors, nor did we attend to whether the mentors we chose believed in the core vision of the district. New teachers often felt alone and overwhelmed. No wonder so many of them grew sour; we threw them in the deep end of the pool and yelled, “Good luck!”

Don't #3

Don't assume that writing an aligned curriculum will improve teaching.

In the state where I got a job as a superintendent, we had new learning standards in mathematics and language arts, but the district had been ignoring them. They hadn't gotten around to translating the standards into a scope and sequence that would give specific shape to the content; they hadn't articulated what we wanted our kids to know and be able to do. So I got people to work writing curriculum, because, I figured, that would be a way to ensure that our kids could meet the standards. We set a target: there would be a written document that showed how what we taught was aligned to the state standards. I did it right – involved teachers, had the drafts looked at by experts, built a review cycle. I was very proud of this project and talked about it all the time.

The mistake?

I focused on the documents, and not on the teaching.

How would I change what I did?

Writing curriculum doesn't guarantee that teachers will use it, or even know how to use it. We were right to build a framework, but that's only the first step. Our assumption was that if the district defined what to teach, each school and each teacher would be free to choose how to teach it. For a master teacher, that might have been a gift. But for rookie, unproven, or struggling teachers - and every district has a lot of them - we needed pacing guides, tools that would help them understand what should happen when. We needed professional development – lots of it – that helped staff make the transition from content to lesson. We should have cared more about building informative assessments and helping teachers use the data from them to inform their instruction. And, most importantly, we should have been more forthright and honest in appraising instruction. Our observation feedback was often politely vague. Our “critical friends” teacher groups were long on the “friends” part and short on the “critical” part. Nobody wanted to hurt anyone's feelings or make judgments about the quality of teaching. Our kids suffered from our hesitation.

Stopping at *writing* curriculum instead of teaching people how to use it was like assuming that if I buy my college-bound son a cookbook, he'll make nutritious meals every night.

Don't #4

Steven Covey's “start with the end in mind” is good advice, but don't forget the middle.

The mistake? We missed the whole concept of benchmarking.

One of the most energizing things I ever did as a school or district leader was to get people fired up about a vision for the future. I seemed to have a gift for helping people

believe that all kids can learn. From a model school project in the 1980's to writing a district mission statement in 1995, I knew that the first step toward reform was getting folks to envision what "it" could look like. I was also big on making plans. I hired staff who could sit at the table with principals and teachers and help them craft SMART goals and savvy strategies for achieving them. We had the beginning, and we could picture the end, but I never realized how important it would be to check, or benchmark, between the beginning and the end.

How would I change it if I could do it again?

I would understand that it's not enough to dream the dream and write the plan and then wait until the end of the year to see if it worked. It's not enough to teach the kids and wait until the big test to see what they learned. It's not enough to give teachers training on a new program or strategy and then assume that they know how to use it. It's important to check along the way.

Did school plans work? Our only measure was the end of the year test scores. If scores went up, the plan worked. If they went down, we assumed it didn't. How naïve. We should have built in checkpoints along the way. In October: were the strategies being implemented? In December: what adjustments had been made to reflect student need? In February: what new issues had emerged that should be addressed the following year?

We should have had checkpoints of student progress – for each one of our 13, 000 kids. We knew we faced a daunting task. Many of our kids were performing far below the state average. Sometimes only 20% of them met or exceeded the standard. We knew that just matching the state rate of growth meant our kids would look like they were making progress, and yet never catch up. Their scores had to be double the state rate of growth. Faced with a challenge like that, you'd think we would have found ways as a school district to lay out incremental steps to ensure that progress. I wonder now why we didn't find ways to keep closer track of progress throughout the year.

Don't #5

Don't assume that giving schools control of money and decision making – as we did through implementing site-based management –will automatically have a positive impact on student achievement.

We made this mistake because we believed in a basically unproven concept: that most decisions that impact schools are best made where the impact is felt – at the school. And, that the money to implement those decisions should go there, too. Basically, we believed, without any data to prove it, that schools knew best.

In hindsight, I worry about the message we sent by adopting this strategy. We didn't know if controlling dollars at the building level made a difference in the quality of education for kids. Were concerns about enrollment numbers and staffing costs distracting? Did we institutionally convey that it was more important to be a good

manager than a good instructional leader? Was this the only way to get resources where they could make the greatest difference?

What would have been a smarter move?

I think my smartest move would have been thinking through two things: first, whether there was any evidence that site based management could really make a difference for kids, and second, what I really wanted from principals. The answers to those two questions should have been the basis for our management structure.

Site based management “feels” right. It gives school staffs control over dollars, and that often translates into perceived power. It raises the stakes for decision making and offers choices to staff. But do principals need to buy supplies? Should we be asking teachers to decide if money should be spent on after school programming or on summer school? There is an argument for a “yes” answer. I pointed out to you earlier that teachers in successful schools take on leadership and participate in decision making. But these kinds of decisions? Wouldn’t decisions that involve curriculum mapping, instructional strategies or intervention resources be more appropriate? There are only so many hours in the day to devote to decision-making, and I’m not sure we asked principals and teachers to invest time in the decisions that would make the greatest difference in classrooms.

I also should have clarified what I really wanted from principals. If I wanted instructional leaders, as I suggested earlier, then I shouldn’t have set them up to be managers. If I wanted them in classrooms, observing and modeling good teaching, then I shouldn’t have sent them to their calculators to figure out how many hours of custodial time to buy. Some have suggested that the answer is hiring a building manager, someone who works alongside the principal and keeps track of the cost of paper towels and office supplies. An alternative would be defining the principal as manager and hiring someone else to focus on teaching and learning – a teacher as an instructional coach, for instance. But, either way, I should have decided.

Don’t #6

Don’t neglect personal accountability.

Technically, I guess this doesn’t qualify as a mistake, because it’s something I never did.

In all of my years as a principal and a superintendent, I never did devise a way to hold individual adults - including myself - accountable for the success of kids. We were never able to say, “We can track the performance of an individual teacher from the time the kids came to her to the time they left and see if they made progress throughout the year.” Or, “We have a way to tie student performance to the performance of our district curriculum department.” We said student achievement was the most important thing, but we observed, monitored, and evaluated employees based on everything but that.

What would I do this time around?

I would find a way to personalize the responsibility each of us has for student achievement. No Child Left Behind, famous for its accountability requirements, identifies only “school” progress. “The school failed to make AYP”. “The school is in corrective action”. This is probably appropriate for a national tracking tool, but it doesn’t work in schools and school districts. In schools where large numbers of kids are not achieving at standards, large numbers of teachers are not doing well either. Remediation and after school programs should not be prescribed as antidotes to bad teaching.

I will never forget asking a teacher in my district what she did if she gave a test at the end of the unit and several kids didn’t do well. “I move on,” she replied. “I move on.” This is not OK, and yet it happens year after year in classroom after classroom. Something must be done if kids are not learning. Some intervention has to happen. We can’t just keep watching and hoping for improvement.

Look at principals and superintendents. There’s a lot of movement in and out of these positions, caused by politics, corruption, salary arguments, and personality conflicts. But how often, really, are these administrators fired because student achievement doesn’t improve? Central office staff, not to mention employees of the state department of education, how do we know if what they do helps or hinders student achievement or, in fact, makes no difference at all? How do we create an accountability chain that doesn’t start and end with the student?

Don’t #7

Don’t ignore your school and district community.

This seems like a no brainer. There isn’t one piece of school improvement literature that doesn’t emphasize the need for community involvement. But my mistake was not being smart about who to include, and why. I knew we had many kids whose parents worked two jobs, had dropped out of school or were struggling just to survive. These parents – members of our community – were often afraid to come to school. They didn’t want to confront teachers, and they didn’t know how to advocate for their kids. These were the community members we went to bat for. We fed them, encouraged them and tried every strategy we could devise to get them involved in their kids’ education.

But the mistake we made was not spending equal time with the community members with money, power, and voice. We often alienated them with our advocacy for poor kids. They felt we were short-changing their kids by championing the cause of others’. They never shifted their agenda from conscience-soothing activities like donating clothes or funding the dental van to active support for raising community expectations for the achievement of all kids, even the poor. We mistakenly assumed that everyone wanted that, and that everyone believed it could happen. But, when push came to shove, these

powerful community members, as often as not, were in my office advocating for *their* children, not our espoused school district values. I never did build a universal belief within the community that a public school district, supported by local tax dollars, could educate all kids. I gave a lot of speeches and moved people to tears, but my conclusion is that I never did get them to believe what I said.

What would I do now?

I would steal an idea from good teachers and get into the heads of the people I was trying to reach. What mattered to my community members of influence? Was it the community's need for skilled citizens? Was it the fact that good schools affect property values? I would find the answer and I would consistently draw the line, figuratively and literally if need be, between what we were doing and their concerns. I would take the time to explain why it was important to open Advanced Placement classes to anyone who wanted to take them. Why we needed to replace basic math classes with an Algebra requirement. Why it's not enough to have our schools work only for some kids. I would try harder to explain that their children's success did not hinge on someone else's failure. That poor kids needed an education more than even pity and donated clothes if they were going to leave us and contribute to the economic growth of the area. I would be bolder about playing to their interests while pursuing our mission.

And finally, Don't #8

Don't lose focus.

What was the mistake?

I admit to being easily distracted as a school and district administrator. I ended up paying attention to so many things: building a new school; passing a levy; settling labor contracts; keeping the school board happy. It was so hard to stay focused, when there were so many demands and so many needs. I'm struck by how many different strategies we tried in my five years as a superintendent. Reform models, Lightspan, smaller learning communities, Alpha Smarts, Summer Institutes, middle school block scheduling, multi-age grouping. I confess I sometimes confused importance with urgency. I looked for shortcuts and rapid progress.

What did I learn?

Choose carefully what you're going to do, and stay with it. I know now that the smartest, most strategic plans have three or four goals, not six, not ten. I know that the urge to try something new is often born of a fear that we've chosen wrong and a frustration that we aren't getting quick results. Don't get so caught up in moving forward that you stop being reflective. I realize now that we rarely stopped to evaluate what we did. Did our full-summer, paid professional development for teachers really improve instruction? We were so proud of our free summer school, with its combination of structured learning activities and trips to the beach. Did kids do better because they participated? Who knew? In

hindsight I see that moving forward and doing something innovative often won out over painstakingly measuring our progress and adjusting our strategies. My advice? Stay the course. Work the plan. Monitor progress and analyze results. It's not glamorous; it doesn't make headlines. But patience and persistence work in achieving success at this most difficult of tasks.

So, that's my list of eight things that you should never do when you're trying to improve schools. I hope you didn't find this speech depressing. Probably not too many public speaking coaches would advise a keynoter to spend an hour talking about what he's done wrong throughout his career. But I didn't mean this speech to be depressing, and I hope you don't see it that way. I wanted it to shine a light on what to do right. A light on how much more we know now than I did then about what works, especially in our most challenged schools. Earlier I talked about the Pritchard report – it's just one of many that have come out in recent years – reports that are beginning to catalog the 'what to do and how to do it' of high performing, high poverty schools. Websites like Education Trust list many schools that have risen to the challenge.

I can talk now about what I would have done differently because I have learned so much from you – principals and teachers in the field, those of you who have chosen the profession, stayed the course, and been relentless in your drive to serve our neediest kids. My hope is that many of you sat there and thought. "We did that one right the first time." Or "We know better than that". After all, you're at the 4th On the Right Track symposium, and it marks four years of celebrating progress – real progress.

I mentioned at the beginning of this speech that when I get to hold the microphone I more often than not talk about the power of personal belief in successfully educating all kids. This belief has two parts: believing in kids – and showing it through what you expect of them – and believing in yourself and your ability to get the job done. All of the professional development, resources, smart strategies or sanctions in the world won't make a difference if the belief is missing.

Believing in kids' ability to learn has to be more than an abstraction. If you don't show what those expectations look like in concrete and measurable ways, no kid – or his parents – will be fooled by you mouthing the words. At the district level, it might look like eliminating tracking or requiring biology or helping to pay for Advanced Placement exams. At the school level, it could be accelerating instruction rather than talking slower and louder. It could be challenging kids to think and not letting them sleep through class. I've read through several of the profiles of schools nominated for recognition here, and I would say they've got this part. They are showing in clear and unambiguous ways that they believe in their kids.

Believing in yourself and your ability to get the job done is sometimes harder. Everybody has heard the phrase "all children can learn". This statement of Ron Edmonds that was once so revolutionary has become commonplace, so commonplace that schools and districts seem to feel the need to elaborate when they use it in their mission statements:

“All children can learn. Really” or “All means all.”
Or “All children can learn. No exceptions. No excuses.”

What most people forget is that what Ron Edmonds went on to say is “we can successfully teach all children whose schooling is of interest to us.” It’s not just “children can learn”. It’s “we can teach them.” That’s where the beliefs come in. That’s what marks the difference between poor and minority schools with low achievement and poor and minority schools with high achievement. A belief on the part of the adults that they can succeed with the kids in the seats in front of them. The people who work in these schools need resources, strategies and interventions. But in the end what they need the most, what fuels them for the long haul, is the belief that they can get the job done. They never give up, and they never blame the kids for their own shortcomings.

So learn from my mistakes. Keep growing your knowledge and refining your practice. And don’t stop believing that you can make a difference in the lives of kids. You can.