



To turn around schools, first turn around the principals

BY MARK COMANDUCCI
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A superintendent outlines the PD plan he is using to model and support excellence for principals in failing schools.

I oversee a portfolio of nine turnaround schools, all of which had an overall rating of F when ACCEL Schools first took them over two years ago. This means that, on average, fewer than 30 percent of students were proficient. As a charter organization in Ohio, our schools receive 40 percent to 60 percent less funding than traditional schools, because charters in Ohio rarely, if ever, get local funding. This means we don't have the budget to radically restaff our schools.

When we started with these schools, I faced a high level of skepticism among the principals. They had been bombarded with change for change's sake, so their trust in leadership had eroded.

The mindset was, "If I keep my head low enough, everything will pass and I'll be fine." To show that the climate had changed, the first thing we did was a book study on Mindset to get them reflecting on their own willingness and openness to be pushed, grow, and improve. This quest to improve is expected from all of our teachers, so it was critical that our principals shared that sacred belief.

Then we started the multi-year process of showing these principals what good leadership looks like and how they can become the leaders who will turn their schools around.

Summer 1: School Redesign Project

In their first summer with us, the principals took part in a four-week Summer Institute, during which they completed a school redesign project. Our aim was for them to focus only on academics and school culture, so we took nonessential tasks off their plate. Our back office handled operational compliance and reporting work so principals could put their energy into distilling what was truly core to them and effectively planning to operationalize it.

This laser focus on the key elements of school turnaround continued throughout the school year.

We asked them to explain why and how they would work with their existing teachers to make their plans a reality for students, family, and teachers throughout the year. Each principal set the vision and mission for their own building-crafting, refining, and articulating what was core to them as it related to their school's culture and academic framework.

Academic Year 1: Learning Content, Understanding Coaching

We supported each of our principals based on collaborative goals, which meant that sometimes we were doing nine different things at nine different schools. To support this personalized approach, we provided all of our principals individual coaching with consultants. Sometimes we had consultants on site, sometimes the communication was via phone or email.

We inherited our current principals from a toxic environment, and we needed the coaching relationship to be sacred and protected. We wanted someone from the outside who was not doing evaluation and who gave me no line of sight into the conversations. The focus was on building our principals' leadership skills and increasing their familiarity with the coaching model-something they were expected to replicate with their teachers.

Very few of our teachers had been exposed to a high-performing, robust, and appropriate coaching relationship, so in our principal PD we modeled coaching for them in real time. We expected teachers to get a coaching meeting every week, and I wanted our principals to have that same sort of coaching themselves. I also checked in weekly with every principal.

During their first academic year, our principals were a leadership team of one. They had no dedicated instructional coach, instead sharing a coach with one or two other schools. The instructional coaches exposed principals to strong teacher coaching, and also spotted instructional issues that we addressed during optional evening PD sessions once or twice a month.

Like our teachers, the majority of our principals had not worked in high-performing schools, so we exposed them to the pillars of best practice through professional development and coaching. Our theory of action is rooted on the belief that principal effectiveness improves student performance, which improves enrollment, which in turn gives principals the funding they need to eventually build out their leadership team.

Academic Year 2: A Pivot to Content-Based PD

After completing a second summer institute, each principal got his or her own instructional coach, doubling the size of the building's leadership team. Some principals responded better to structured professional development settings than coaching or mentoring, so in year 2 we used our coaching resources as part of a mapped sequence of traditional PD.

Now that our principals understood coaching and had an instructional coach at their campus, we pivoted to content-based, outcome-focused PD. I think of year 2 as a step function, with each formal PD event followed by coaching so that principals constantly build on what they learn.

Our ultimate goal is to empower each principal so that every school in the system operates on its own, financially and in terms of leadership capacity. I believe we've made a good start: we have delivered on the culture and curricular shifts we had promised, and we have kept nonessential tasks off our principals' plates. Those steps have earned us their trust, and our coaching and PD is giving them the skills they need to turn their schools around.

Our principals are excited about the support and the autonomy they get—and the accountability that comes with it.

About the Author:

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