

How can we sustain a culture of exceptional instruction?

In this book, we have devoted our attention toward helping school leaders to advance the quality of instruction and student satisfaction in schools by suggesting a comprehensive plan to improve the quality of teaching continuously and consistently. We know that it is possible for new or reinvigorated leaders to come on like gangbusters and transform a school into an instructional environment where everyone knows what great teaching looks like and knows the performance standards for every teacher. But how is it possible to sustain the culture of great teaching over time? We recognize that teachers come and go, and various instructional leaders come and go. Many factors affect the consistent quality of teaching in a school, and we would hope that the quality is consistently great. This chapter discusses the observable systems, the common values, and the intangible feeling-tone that contribute to a culture of consistently high-quality instruction.

We list below a set of actions that a school leader should take to sustain high-quality teaching in a school. These actions follow the steps that we describe in the previous chapters: defining high-quality teaching; taking the measure of the state of teaching in a school; recruiting and hiring with the quality standard in mind; providing meaningful induction, mentoring, and professional development experiences aligned with the recognized standard; and following a supportive teacher evaluation program. We list and describe briefly here the efforts toward sustaining quality teaching. In the balance of the chapter, we elaborate about the intention and importance of each measure.

TEN ACTIONS TO SUSTAIN HIGH-QUALITY TEACHING

1. Attend carefully to basic management requirements so that basic routines are unobtrusive, seamless, and practically guaranteed.
2. Minimize distractions to protect the sanctity of the classroom.
3. Set a vision that identifies high-quality teaching as the highest priority in the school.
4. Carefully select the right people for the right positions.
5. Balance leadership between providing direction and giving directives.
6. Communicate in a timely and consistently clear manner.
7. Set the standards for professional conduct, including the way we talk about students and families.
8. Encourage collaborative efforts.
9. Foster reflection and continuous improvement.
10. Engage in ongoing professional dialogues.

SYSTEMS IN PLACE

First, if a school does not have basic systems in place for registration, scheduling, transportation, maintenance, custodial services, food service, attendance reporting, and communication with home, then a principal should drop everything now and turn attention to putting these routine systems in place. The idea is that teachers and students should be able to take certain conditions for granted so that they can turn their complete attention to teaching and learning. It is easy to imagine that teaching is compromised and learning challenged when a radiator whistles in the back of the room, when the classroom swings between blistering heat and arctic chill, when kids miss lunch, when busses don't arrive on time, for instance. This means that the basic systems common to all schools should become routines that only a few people have to think about, and the systems should be in place to support teaching and learning rather than undermine those efforts.

SANCTITY OF THE CLASSROOM

School leaders should do all that they can do to protect the sanctity of the classroom. If someone routinely reads announcements over a public

address system, these announcements should be read once a day, at the same time each day. Other announcements should be rare and honor only real emergencies. We know from the research of Hillocks (2009b) that there is a significant negative correlation between classroom diversions and learning—that is, the more diversions, the less learning. By protecting the classroom from the various intrusions that can occur on any day, a school leader sends a signal to everyone that the classroom must be protected because that is where the central business of the school should thrive unimpeded. In some ways, the attention to the seemingly trivial matter of fighting back intrusions is like the police effort to battle the relatively mundane problem of vandalism in an effort to discourage other crimes, the so called “broken windows theory” of Kelling and Coles (1996). Studies have demonstrated that when vandalism, like graffiti and broken windows, is tolerated, other crime emerges because the vandalized areas seem unprotected and vulnerable and the general atmosphere of the community seems to tolerate crime. When we allow a variety of distractions to intrude into the classroom, we admit that instructional time is not terribly valuable. When we keep distractions to a minimum, we signal to everyone that instructional time is a precious commodity and we have to protect it vigilantly.

ENVISIONING QUALITY TEACHING

Taking care of basic management routines and protecting instructional time from distractions implies to everyone that the quality of instruction in a school is most important. But school leaders need to convey explicitly that the highest priority on their agenda is that all students receive high-quality instruction. School leaders can convey this message often, through the conduct of purposeful meetings, the daily interchanges with staff, the written communication to parents, the celebration of accomplishments, the support for professional development, and the reflective conversations with all instructional personnel. *Teaching matters most* should be the mantra and the evaluative filter for judging the merits for various requests, including budget proposals, changes to routine systems, placements for students, or appeals for assemblies and various exceptions to the schedule.

RIGHT PEOPLE IN RIGHT PLACES

If teaching matters most, then personnel decisions are critical. If there are opportunities to place people in leadership and instructional support positions, it is crucial to put the right people in these positions. This

requires the discipline to think strategically rather than tactically. By *strategic* we mean acting with special attention to the long-term goals and the honoring of educational values. We have seen leaders work tactically to hire people to befriend an influential person, to invigorate sagging morale, or to address other political expediencies. As an example, we can think about the criteria for hiring an instructional coach, a team leader, or a department head. In making the decision, we would have to ask these questions: What is the candidate's knowledge base? What has been the candidate's experience with students? Does the candidate care about kids? Is the candidate able to communicate effectively? What are the candidate's organizational skills? Generally, what is the basis for making decisions about placing people in positions of leadership? When we begin to make compromises about instructional matters like the hiring of instructional leaders, we undermine our own efforts to advance the quality of teaching. In Resource D, we have included questions for teacher interviews that would be helpful in completing an instructional review, but some of the questions might be useful in screening job candidates.

BALANCED LEADERSHIP

If we have carefully placed people in important leadership positions, this suggests that we have selected people with the appropriate expertise and leadership skills to function in their positions. While we should be able to depend on the expertise of others, it is appropriate for a principal to set a direction for a leadership team. A principal's vision for improving the quality of teaching and the agenda for advancing the instructional program for the school should not be a dark mystery. Every move that a principal makes should be consistent with the goal of advancing the instructional program. When the principal's actions are inconsistent with the explicitly stated vision, everyone recognizes the incongruity and experiences the dissonance. At the same time, the principal should not be directing every move, paralyzing everyone into thinking that individuals cannot act without a specific directive from the principal. Teaching staff should not revert to teaching defensively because they do not know what the principal wants or values. With a clear sense of the underlying principles that support curriculum and drive instruction, teachers should be able to make decisions required for a specific group of students in a specific instructional moment or context. This allowance for a good degree of autonomy recognizes the professional stature of teachers and leaders and satisfies a basic human desire to have some say in decisions that affect them. At the same time, through ongoing dialogue and other means of oversight, a principal can monitor the consistent communitywide effort

to improve the quality of teaching continually. The balancing effort includes soliciting and accepting input from a variety of thinkers, without the obligation to act on everyone's suggestions. Seeking input is not the same as promising to honor every request. In brief, principals in schools that sustain efforts toward high-quality teaching practice a kind of balanced leadership, providing direction without giving constant directives and accepting input without committing to every suggestion and without abdicating all decision-making to others.

CLEAR AND TIMELY COMMUNICATION

We recall our first days in graduate programs when we sat in classes with more experienced graduate students who seemed to talk in ways that only they and the professor could understand. They had already been initiated into the esoteric world of graduate studies in a specific discipline. We had to learn to talk the talk. This was part of our induction into the world of graduate studies. We see similar situations occurring in schools, with new teachers trying to figure out a lot of things, including how to talk the way the more experienced staff members talk. School leaders can help to remove the veil of mystery about how we talk about the central goals of the school and the actions in the classroom.

Basic to leadership is the ability to tell the story of where the school has been and to describe where it is going. The principal is most responsible for communicating to instructional staff and to people in leadership positions that the quality of teaching is the highest priority. The principal must make it clear that the highest value is the quality of instruction and the quality of students' experience in the classroom. A school leader can convey this intention and central value in straightforward, nontechnical language. If we talk to our noneducator neighbors and friends and claim that the most important factor to influence the improvement of a school is the quality of teaching, they know on one level exactly what we mean. It seems like common sense. But someone needs to have been in many classrooms and to have engaged in many reflective conversations to say in vivid detail what quality teaching looks like and sounds like. It is also possible to describe these features of instruction in ways that friends, neighbors, and school board members can appreciate. Convenient abbreviations and acronyms seem efficient uses of language, but they can obfuscate meaning and blunt understanding of intent. Straightforward, everyday language should convey goals and shape the image of the kind of school where consistently high-quality teaching is the first priority.

In many ways, leaders have to take back ownership of the language that we use to talk about the mission of schools. We prefer to talk about the

quality of instruction, the improvement of learning, and the quality of learners' experiences, as opposed to emphasizing achievement, improved test scores, metrics, quality dashboards, data mining, data-driven instruction, accountability, interventions, and branding—terms that together seem a strange mix of business and medicine, neither of which represents the central purpose of schools. Principals can give way to the intrusions of this imported language, or they can model and support the language that refers to children, learners, learning, teaching, supporting, growing, and improving.

It is important to communicate clearly, but it is also important to communicate in a timely manner. Not much frustrates staff and parents more than receiving late notice about decisions and changes that affect the conduct of teaching and learning in the classroom. Principals need to provide for regular and timely communication with staff and parents. It is especially important to communicate regularly with others in instructional leadership positions. One forum for communication is the regular meetings with leaders like department chairs, instructional coaches, and team leaders. We especially like the idea of an annual meeting to review the procedures for teacher evaluation in an effort to reduce misunderstandings about processes and expectations, followed up with regular checks on the progress of the system. We can see value in regular and purposeful meetings with staff members who have a hand in mentoring, developing curriculum, delivering professional development, and supporting classroom activities.

STANDARDS FOR PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT

We recall working together in one high school where the same small group of teachers met over coffee in the teachers' lounge each morning. It didn't take a committed eavesdropper to know that the gist of their conversations recounted their estimation of the despicable behavior of teenagers, the insensitivity of parents, the shortcomings of their colleagues, and the Machiavellian moves of the administrators, which included us. There was almost a tangible dark cloud hovering over their heads. But they were the exception to the whole staff. Over time, with lots of modeling and some correctives, we could move the staff toward embracing more child-centered and learning-centered language and action. The change does not come by way of a memo or an announcement. Instead, over time, as leaders insist on the basic human dignity of all students and all parents and underscore the vast potential for all learners, the same attitude spreads among staff members.

We also recall that over time teachers took pride in working at the school. One teacher observed, "You have to be a pretty good teacher if you continue to work here." That observation derived from the many

classroom observations, reflective conversations, department meetings, professional development experiences, and shared readings and discussions that institutionalized the value of high-quality instruction and conveyed the specific criteria that distinguished high-quality teaching. We could see that over time most teachers included some core features of sound instruction: for example, conveying specific goals situated within the context of the preceding lessons and the subsequent lessons, engaging all learners actively and intellectually, attending to formative assessments and self-assessments, aligning assessments with goals and activities, and designing activities that had some intellectual merit. This did not occur all at once, but it took years to realize. If we can indulge in a sports analogy for a moment, we want to refer to the leadership practices of former Bulls and Lakers coach Phil Jackson. In a broadcast of a Bulls game, commentator Stacy King, a former Bulls player, recalled that Jackson emphasized that through practice and repetition the players would develop such strong habits that in times of duress during games, they would rely on the good habits and not fall back on bad habits. This idea is part of what Jackson calls *invisible leadership*. He reached a point with his several championship teams where he did not have to orchestrate every move but could rely on the good habits of others to guide their conduct and decision-making on the court. We judge that in a similar way, with the constant attention to the standards of high-quality instruction, teachers can fall back on good habits, even during the inevitable times of stress and duress.

COLLABORATION

We have seen from our own research (McCann, Ressler, Chambers, & Minor, 2010) the power of teacher collaboration. Lortie's (1975) observations about the characteristic isolation of most teachers remain true today. Most teachers work independently in their own classrooms, with rare visits from teaching colleagues during instructional time. When teachers follow collaborative practices common to lesson study (for example, Stigler & Hiebert, 1999), they focus on the continuous refinement of lessons that attempt to help students learn challenging concepts. In such a collaborative arrangement, teachers plan lessons together, observe each other teach the lessons, refine the lessons, teach again under observation, refine again, and "publish" the resulting highly refined instructional material. The publishing might be as simple as archiving lesson plan documents on a school server or other Internet-accessible server.

In a broader sense, the curriculum that teachers follow should be the product of teachers' work together, even if the curriculum relies heavily

on commercially prepared materials. As Marzano (2003) stresses, teachers need to be able to deliver a viable curriculum. To us, this means that the curriculum needs to be more than an oral tradition about what is commonly taught for specific subjects at specific grades, and more than curriculum maps or lists of standards. Teachers need access to bona fide curriculum guides that identify goals, link goals to standards, provide quality instructional materials and plans, and include assessments. School leaders can set the agenda for curriculum development, organize teams to develop and refresh curriculum, provide the necessary professional development about curriculum writing, and monitor and evaluate the process and products.

If teachers are going to move away from isolation and move toward greater collaboration and interdependence, school leaders must provide the time and support to allow teachers to meet together and to observe each other. Teachers commonly report that they crave opportunities to meet with colleagues and that the typical structure of school organizations works against frequent meetings. Providing the time and support for collaboration honors what teachers say they need and fosters their sense of efficacy. Of course, finding meeting time in a crowded school day is a perennial challenge. Realistically, it may take a school leader considerable time to fashion a schedule that is acceptable to teachers, parents, and board members, or to persuade staff members to find their own creative means to work together, either face-to-face or in an online environment. We offer a caution here. Anyone who has attempted to move a staff to work as a professional learning team recognizes that by simply organizing people into groups does not make them productive or even civil teams. The school's professional development plan should foster the communication and group problem-solving practices that help a team to function well.

REFLECTION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The various aligned efforts in a school, such as induction, mentoring, professional development, curriculum development, and teacher evaluation, should foster reflection and promote a concerted effort for continuous improvement. Ideally, we would like to see each teacher in a school attempting every day to teach the perfect lesson, for its own sake. Perhaps that sounds too idealistic, and we recognize that no one will actually attain perfection. But we judge that teachers and school leaders define for themselves the quality of their own experience. There are certainly external factors in any school day or class period that affect

our experience, but there are also internal factors, like fatigue, doubt, loss of concentration, wavering commitment, to name a few. In contrast to popular conceptions, we judge that teachers can measure their *daily* performance against a perfection standard, as opposed to looking back on the previous *year's* performance through the lens of the achievement test scores for students who have already moved on to the next grade. We understand that illness, bereavement, economic peril, and other sources of stress will interfere with a teacher's best efforts. But the mentoring, professional development, and teacher evaluation systems should promote a culture of striving toward an ideal. Every day, the media will include stories that imply or overtly express doubt about the performance and commitment of teachers. In contrast, the local school leaders should promote and celebrate the idea that *teaching matters most* and that all teachers should strive to do their best every day. This is what defines a teacher.

If we can indulge in another sports analogy, we will recall our days as rather mediocre tennis players. Although it didn't turn our games around dramatically, we came under the influence of Gallwey's *The Inner Game of Tennis* (1986). In Gallwey's descriptions, we recognized in ourselves the various mind games we played while competing in tennis—"Since it is already 30-love, I'll concede this point and then I'll get the serve back to have a chance to win a game." "I hope, I hope, I hope he double faults." "I think a cramp is developing in my left knee, which will allow me to explain my poor play."—and so on. In contrast, if we concentrated on the moment—hitting a sweet serve, returning a serve with authority, hitting the backhand where we wanted it—the end result—winning the game—would take care of itself. In fact, the quality of our experience as tennis players depended on being in the moment to strive for that perfect shot, for the sake of the beauty of accomplishing that ideal, or at least coming near. Gallwey drew heavily from Zen thinkers, and his popular tennis book led to other spin-offs, including *The Inner Game of Work* (Gallwey, 2001). In a sense, we were trying to experience the Zen or phenomenology of tennis. We judge that with the vision and support of leaders who emphasize the quality of teachers' and learners' experiences every day, teachers can experience the Zen of teaching, with each day a striving for perfection. Every day we emerge from classrooms with a sense of how close we came to the ideal we wanted to achieve. We might think, "That discussion went well, although I still haven't heard much from the guy in the corner who seems apathetic. Next time, I think I will initiate discussion by soliciting his thoughts." The seemingly simple reflection suggests that the teacher strives toward a truly dialogic classroom and values the participation of all class members as necessary for the shared inquiry. If the lesson has

fallen short, the teacher does not despair but thinks of adjustments to move practice closer to the ideal. The striving toward the ideal defines the quality of experience.

ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DIALOGUES

Principals and other school leaders need to talk shop almost incessantly in school. They need to engage with others in ongoing professional dialogues. Of course, there is a danger that a principal can initiate conversation in an accusatory way, for example, “Are you still relying on those insipid word search worksheets?” If someone is going to make a dialogic bid (Nystrand, 1997), she will need to frame the inquiry in such a way that it suggests a common understanding and recognizes the knowledge of the other participants—“I know that you have worked hard to refresh the geometry curriculum to make it more project-based. How has that worked out? How are kids responding?” The difference in the latter example is that the principal initiating the conversation recognizes that the geometry teacher has done some important curriculum work, and she appreciates that the teacher is reflective enough to evaluate the impact of the curriculum changes. The way that the principal introduces and frames the question makes all the difference. When the conversational partners build from such a positive inquiry frame, the conversation is likely to remain constructive, contribute to a positive and professional tone throughout the building, and underscore the importance of the work of the teachers in the school. Having such conversations in hallways, in the teachers’ lounge, in the parking lot, and in meeting rooms should be commonplace and convey the idea that the shared interest of the principal and staff of the school is that students are receiving the best instruction possible and having the best possible experience in the classroom.

To follow the recommendations from this chapter, a principal would have to attend seriously to his or her own professional development by reading extensively, attending selected conferences, and conferring with colleagues. The principal’s influential readings can find their way into the lives of teachers and can become the focus for discussions. The idea is not to hold seminars about the principal’s reading list, with the principal dominating the discussions. Instead, the experience of sharing literature about teaching and learning is a given for teams of professionals who embrace the idea that teaching matters most and strive together to make the quality of instruction and the quality of students’ experience every day as meaningful and compelling as possible.

SUMMARY

In this chapter, we offer recommendations for sustaining a school culture that conveys the value that *teaching matters most*. Many factors can undermine efforts to maintain high-quality teaching, but a few common-sense efforts can help to push back the pressures that threaten to diminish the growth of a staff. The efforts include attention to the goals that one sets and the language that one uses to talk about students, parents, and the endeavors of schools. Principals convey the values they hold not only by how they speak, but also by the actions they take. We urge an effort to minimize distractions and to promote collaboration. Taken together, the various recommendations should foster reflective practice and perhaps allow teachers to experience the Zen or inner game of teaching. Responsibility falls to the principal to attend to his or her own professional development, to set an example, and to inform moves designed to advance the quality of instruction.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION AND REFLECTION

1. What are the basic systems that your school has in place to register students, take attendance, collect grades, deliver lunches, transport students, communicate with teachers, and so forth? How are these systems working? To what extent are any of these systems compromised to the point that they make the work of teaching more difficult than it has to be? What can you do to repair or refine the systems?
2. If you were to complete a kind of audit of the kinds of distractions that can interfere with the quality of teaching and learning every day, what would you find? What steps could you take to suppress or minimize the distractions?
3. What is your sense about the prevailing feeling tone and dominant language in your school? How do teachers talk about kids and their parents? What can you do to influence the talk in school to move it to a higher professional level?
4. How well do you communicate with staff? What is the basis for your judgment? If others could speak candidly to you, what would they recommend that you do to refine your communication practices?
5. What opportunities do you provide for teachers to collaborate? Are these rare occasions, like summer curriculum projects, or regular

occurrences? What can you do to facilitate teacher's collaborating on a regular basis? What value do you see in the collaborations?

ACTION STEPS TO FOSTER A CULTURE OF HIGH-QUALITY TEACHING

- Take action to minimize classroom intrusions and to protect the sanctity of the classroom. This action should affect public address announcement and in-school systems for communicating with teachers and students.
- Examine your existing daily schedule to find times when teachers can meet to collaborate. The schedule is the beginning point. You will also need to encourage collaborative efforts for planning and for reflections on the effects of instruction. A move to a more collaborative environment requires the professional development needed to foster productive teamwork.
- Prepare an individual professional growth plan that will advance your expertise about the classroom practices that most effectively promote students' learning and satisfaction. Your plan should include attention to how you will share what you have learned with other members of the staff and engage them in dialogue about this learning.

Summary of Action Steps



