



LESSONS for LEADERS

Despite many challenges that often doom schools to failure, a principal has led an increase in student achievement and a decrease in the drop-out rate at his school. The lessons he learned can be applied anywhere.

BY DOUGLAS FISHER AND NANCY FREY

Community members and politicians seem to believe that increasing student achievement in urban schools is easy, almost formulaic. They often are quoted in the press as thinking the problems in schools will be alleviated if we simply “raise standards,” “improve teacher preparation,” and “increase accountability.” However, those of us who have spent time with students in urban settings understand the complexity of the issues. Creating change in an urban high school is a daunting task. However, it is being done at Hoover High School in San Diego, thanks to collaboration with staff members, students, and the community.

Hoover enrolls more than 2,000 students, 46% of who are English language learners and 98% of whom qualify for free and reduced-price lunch. The ethnic composition of Hoover is 54% Latino, 21% Black, 20% Asian and Filipino, and 4% White. But Hoover has recently met its state accountability target for the first time in 15 years, and ninth-grade reading levels have risen two grade levels.

Measures of achievement are rising while the student body has remained stable—the expulsion rate has been reduced by two-thirds, and the dropout rate has declined each year as well. In 1999, Doug Williams became the principal of Hoover, and the administrative process Williams used to start improving Hoover can help others duplicate his success.

Lesson 1

Spend Time Doing Things You Care About

The most obvious and notable difference between Williams and other principals with whom we have worked is where he spends his time. Williams seems to be all over campus—in the quad, at math department meetings, and at staff development sessions. Implementing a 4 x 4 block schedule has enabled the staff to participate in monthly professional development sessions during their 90-minute preparatory period. The presenters give their presentation four times, each time to a quarter of the staff. At the end of the day, everyone has received information on the selected topic while benefiting from a small-group setting. Williams attends every presentation and is an active participant, which demonstrates to teachers that the content of the professional development is important. If someone cannot attend the session, you can be sure that person will receive an invitation to see Williams about the content of the training.

In addition to his attendance and participation in professional development, Williams spends two hours a day in classrooms. He observes lessons and interacts with students on a daily basis. His feedback is succinct and he specifically looks for evidence that teachers are implementing the strategies they learned during professional development sessions. In fact, he and his vice principals have created classroom observation forms that feature the instructional concepts covered in staff development sessions. To meet his schedule of classroom observations, he has handed off some routine tasks to a group of professionals in his office. He talks with this group before or after school, when students and teachers are not engaged in teaching and learning.

The biggest and perhaps most controversial decision Williams has made in terms of where he spends his time involves his participation in district-level events. He does not like to be away from campus and rarely attends meetings that take him away from school during the day. Although he acknowledges that this policy creates a longer workday for him, he prefers to attend administrative meetings that are held after school.

Lesson 2

Be the Teacher You Want to Hire

Williams models reading during the daily 20-minute independent reading period. He models trash pick-up. He models his interactions with students in front of the campus security and school

police officers. In addition to this type of modeling, Williams also believes that dress is important in setting a tone and establishing the culture of the school. Although there is no formal dress code for teachers, Williams has made very clear that the teachers at Hoover should look like professionals. Williams models this daily—he wears slacks and a tie or school spirit clothes every day.

But more important is his instructional modeling for teachers. Williams regularly models lessons in front of teachers and students. The demonstration lessons enable him to have reflective conversations with teachers about quality instruction and high expectations. These lessons also reinforce his credibility and keep him focused on the complexities of teaching at Hoover.

Lesson 3

Talk With the Students Often, and Talk About Things That Matter

Most principals like to take time to talk with students—after all that's why principals go into the field of education. Of course, principals often have to talk with students during less-than-positive events (e.g., suspensions or academic failure). However, this shouldn't be the only time that instructional leaders interact with students. Williams talks with students daily. The most impressive discussions are student accountability talks for Stanford 9: Williams meets individually with each 9th, 10th, and 11th grader to discuss his or her performance on the last standardized test. He points out areas in which the student has done well and asks for a commitment to do better this year. In addition, he asks the student how he or she plans to improve:

Williams: You did really well on the math section; you must get good grades in math.

Malik: Yeah, they're OK. I do OK in math.

Williams: What can you do to score even better?

Malik: I gotta remember the formulas. I gotta figure out a way to remember those. They trip me up.

Williams: What about your English scores? What can you do to get better scores there?

Malik: I need to finish faster. My teacher said that I better read [all the questions] first and find ones that are easier for me.... But I gotta remember to mark the answers in the right place. Then at the end, I guess I should fill in answers and not leave the paper blank.

Williams: And you should read every night. Reading will help you a lot through your life. Read whatever you want, but read.

Malik: Yeah, I better get back to class. We're reading *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the teacher really likes that book.

These conversations have a profound effect on the students at Hoover. Every educator knows that students often don't take standardized tests seriously. Williams spent six

weeks meeting with students so they would understand that the Stanford 9 matters, that they could do well on it, and that they could use test-taking strategies when they weren't certain of the answers.

LESSON 4

Surround Yourself With Good People, Then Get Out of Their Way

The demands on principals are extensive and diverse. Even the most energetic administrator is hard-pressed to accomplish these tasks alone. Williams has cautioned his vice-principals that micromanaging can be a fatal error in a large organization. He has also made it clear to staff members that he needs each of them to ensure that Hoover's positive trajectory is maintained. Toward this end, he has sought faculty members who show leadership and collaboration skills.

For example, his staff development committee is composed of classroom teachers, the peer coach, and a vice principal. They have the authority to propose, design, and deliver professional development and advise the administrative team on classroom accountability. The school's Silent, Sustained Reading Committee—a group of teachers—were charged with setting policy for the daily 20-minute silent sustained reading program.

In addition, the special education department and another vice principal have been working for the past year to create more inclusive practices for students with disabilities. They recently proposed a restructured department that will assign special education teachers to each department in the school—English, mathematics, social studies, science, and electives—to design and deliver curriculum accommodations and modifications. Other special education teachers will operate an innovative “lab class” in which students with and without disabilities can receive specialized support, such as individualized reading instruction and homework help. They have also adopted an advocate-teacher model for supporting families and writing Individual Education Plans. This team not only researched alternatives and proposed the department restructuring, but also they created budget projections, a professional development needs assessment, and an accountability structure.

Williams meets with all of these teams to keep abreast of progress, answer questions, and marshal resources. He says that it's not enough to delegate work to others—you must also give them authority to get the work done. It is also vital to ensure that a reporting structure exists. “When I've got good people, I don't need to be there every step of the way. But I do need to stay in touch with the work as it progresses,” says Williams. We believe that Williams and his faculty members practice the true definition of shared decision making. The Western Association of Schools and Colleges apparently agreed—they recently awarded Hoover an unprecedented six-year accreditation for the depth and breadth of the collaborative work among faculty members and administrators.

LESSON 5

Nurture Partnerships, Especially Those that Benefit the School

We have learned a number of valuable lessons about instructional leadership from Williams. Interestingly, he says that there are many things that he just doesn't get to in a given day. He has created a system to ensure that budgets are monitored, the bells ring on time, and supplies are ordered. Williams has also developed a number of partnerships that ensure his school operates efficiently.

For example, Hoover is an old school—more than 70 years old. Although many see this as a problem, Williams realized that Hoover has thousands of alumni. Tapping the resources of the alumni for only the price of a few dinners and some space on campus resulted in funding for new construction; scholarships for current students; and scads of volunteers who provide needed services, such as mentoring and completing senior exhibition project evaluations. When a new state English-language-learner assessment was required this past year, Williams and his staff members were faced with the challenge of administering the tests to 1,000 students in six weeks. The alumni and retired Hoover teachers participated in required training and then assisted staff members in assessing all the students within the testing window.

In addition to working with alumni, Williams has developed a number of business partnerships. These partners have provided intern sites for seniors and funds for computers, crime prevention, graffiti patrol, and books for the library. One of the partnerships is with San Diego State University. This partnership has resulted in new grants and contracts (i.e., income) for the school, on-site graduate programs for teachers, on-site student-teacher programs, and some “critical friends” who can ask hard questions, support decisions, and help Williams think about the future of Hoover.

Conclusion

Just accomplishing these five lessons provides instructional leaders with a full-time job, and principals have other responsibilities as well. But the changing role of the principal to that of instructional leader demands that administrators spend time doing what matters most and find ways to let others help do the rest. We believe that these five lessons will have the greatest payoff in terms of student achievement. **PL**

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