Culture shift doesn't occur overnight — or without conflict

Staff members of every school face an inevitable question each year: What happens in our school when, despite our best efforts in the classroom, a student does not learn?

In traditional schools, the answer is left to the discretion of the individual classroom teacher, who is free to respond in different ways. The support a student will (or will not) receive depends on his or her teacher's practices, rather than a collective effort and a coordinated response. In truth, most schools play a form of educational lottery with children.

In professional learning communities, however, schools create a systematic response — processes to monitor each student's learning and to ensure that a student who struggles is provided additional time and support for learning according to a schoolwide plan. Furthermore, the response is timely. Students are identified as soon as they experience difficulty, allowing the school to focus on intervention rather than remediation. The response is directive. Students are not invited to seek extra help; they are required to receive the additional assistance and devote the extra time necessary to master the learning.

This coordinated system of support for students never occurs by chance. It can only occur when school leaders work with staff to develop a plan of intervention, carefully monitor the implementation of that plan, and confront those who disregard it. Furthermore, an effective system of intervention is not merely an add-on to existing school structures and assumptions, but represents a natural outgrowth of strong school cultures dominated by certain unifying concepts.

Boones Mill Elementary School in Franklin County, Va.; Los Penasquitos Elementary School in Rancho Penasquitos, Calif.; Freeport Intermediate School in Freeport, Texas, and Adlai Stevenson High School in Lincolnshire, Ill., illustrate this systematic approach to responding when students do not learn (DuFour, DuFour, Eaker, & Karhanek, 2004). The schools could not be more
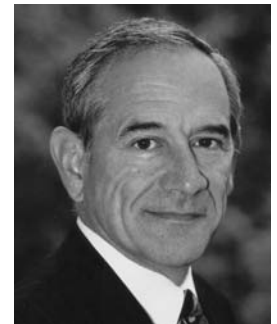
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dissimilar in terms of size, geographic location, accessibility to resources, and the students and the communities they serve. Yet these schools share common themes.

One of the most evident commonalities is that the staff in each school is emphatic about and fixated on the fundamental purpose of the school — high levels of learning for all students. There is no ambiguity and no hedging about their goal. No one suggests that all kids will learn if they are conscientious, responsible, attentive, developmentally ready, fluent in English, and come from homes with concerned parents who take an interest in their education. There is no hint that staff members believe they can help all kids learn if class sizes are reduced, more resources are made available, new textbooks are purchased, or more support staff are hired. In these four schools, staff members embraced the premise that the very reason their schools exist is to help all their students — every one of the flawed, imperfect boys and girls who come to them each day — acquire essential knowledge and skills using the resources available to the school.

The collective commitment to high levels of learning for every student led these schools to assess the impact of their efforts and decisions based on tangible results. When teachers in a school are truly focused on student learning as their primary mission, they inevitably seek valid methods to assess the extent and depth of that learning. The teachers in these four schools all found that frequent common assessments, developed collaboratively and scored by every teacher of a grade level or course, were a vital resource in their efforts to monitor student learning. Doug Reeves (2004, p. 114-115) describes this process as "the gold standard in educational accountability" because these assessments are used to "improve teaching and learning, not merely to evaluate students and schools."

The teachers in the four schools embrace data and information from their common assessments because the assessments provide timely and powerful insights into their students' learning. They do not denigrate data that suggest all is not well, nor do they blindly worship means, modes, and medians. They have a healthy respect for the results of their common assessments because those assessments help them monitor the effectiveness of their teaching and identify individual students who are experiencing difficulty. Once those students are identified, the schoolwide system

of intervention ensures that the students immediately receive additional time and support for learning.

HOW LEADERS CREATE A CULTURE COMMITTED TO LEARNING

A critical element in creating these powerful school cultures is the principal's leadership. Each is clearly committed to empowering staff, delegating authority, and developing collaborative decision-making processes, but none is unwilling to confront a staff member who violates the fundamental concepts of the school's culture. Leadership is widely distributed in each school, with clearly delineated guiding coalitions overseeing the improvement process. The collaborative team structures in place in each school also encourage fluid situational leadership throughout the school. When a team discovers that one of its members has special expertise in a particular content area, in teaching a concept, in developing effective assessments, or in meeting the needs of a particular kind of learner, that member naturally assumes temporary leadership based on that expertise when the team focuses on that topic. The principals delegate authority and serve as leaders of leaders rather than the central problem solver of the school.

Nevertheless, in the early stages of implementing the changes that helped the school become a professional learning community, each principal faced challenges from one or more staff members who either aggressively or passively resisted the school's new direction. The consistent way the principals dealt with staff challenges offers important insights into leading the professional learning community process. In every case, the principal met with the teacher privately, stated concerns very directly, and identified the specific steps the teacher needed to take to remedy the situation. Finally, the principal asked how he or she might help the teacher make the necessary changes.

The teachers did not always respond positively to these discussions. Some became quite emotional and defensive. The principals, however, did not hedge. They made it clear that the teacher's behavior was unacceptable and that the need for change was imperative. They did so without rancor, but they left no doubt about their expectations.

Perhaps there are schools that have made the transition to a professional learning community without conflict or anxiety, but I am unaware of any. Disagreements and tension are to be expected. The question schools must face is not, "How can we eliminate all potential for conflict as we go through this process?," but rather, "How will we react when we are immersed in the conflict that accompanies significant change?" In *Crucial Conversation*s (Patterson, Grenny, McMillan, & Switzler, 2002), the authors contrast how teams respond when faced with conflict. Ineffective teams will ignore the problem, letting it fester and build until resentment and frustration lead to an explosion of accusations and recrimination. Good teams will take the matter to the boss and ask that he or she deal with the problem and find a satisfactory solution. Great teams will deal with the issue themselves, engaging in open dialogue and applying positive peer pressure to bring about the desired change.

The problem in schools is that teams almost never start out as great teams. Before they get to the point where team members can work together to resolve the matter, they likely will need the principal to help remedy the situation. A critical factor in creating the learning-centered culture of these four schools was the principal's willingness to confront obvious violations of the concepts upon which those cultures were built.

Culture has been defined as "the way we do things around here." Leaders shape the norms of behavior (and thus the culture) of their organizations in a number of ways. When principals work with staff to build processes to monitor each student's learning and to develop systems of intervention that give students additional time and support when they experience difficulty, they create the structures that support the concept of learning for all. When they give staff clear parameters to guide their work but considerable autonomy in implementation, they increase the likelihood that staff members will embrace that concept. But when principals are unwilling to tolerate actions that violate the underlying values of the culture, they use a powerful strategy for shaping the norms of behavior within their school.

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