

# Sustaining Leadership: A Principal's Reflection

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As I write this article I intend to give you the perspectives of a first-year elementary school principal and his attempts to create sustainable change and deep cultural impact, but it will surely be tempered with my own questions and curiosity about this thing we call leadership. This patient reflection must begin with the end, which in a circle is really just the beginning.

For unforeseen family health reasons, I have taken a one year's leave of absence from the school, but was able to have conversation with our instructional coach at the school a month after school had started. She shared with me that while working with the eight teacher candidates from the University of Colorado who work at our school as part of their induction, one of them said something that was a first sign of successful work last year. As Cyndi, the coach, brought them up to speed on our work around student responsibility last year and the many issues we inherited around discipline, the teacher candidate curiously stated, "But you guys don't have a discipline problem."

I wish I could express what went on in my stomach, my soul, when I heard her tell me this story. By no means is it a completed circle, but it is a strong indicator of growth from our work last year at a school that some called "out of control." It also deepens my belief that "student discipline" is the wrong term and it skews everything we are trying to accomplish around creating learning environments. On the very first day of school last year, we read an article and then made a consensus decision as a staff of 78 that we were going to "teach" student responsibility and we were going to create a system in which the students took the lead in their behavior management and responsibility. We were going to make a not-so-subtle shift from being disciplinarians, which was clearly not working, to being coaches and models.

The staff had said to me when I met with them in May of 2004 that "student discipline" was the number one issue at the school and I was able to rephrase that in August as "responsible students" is our number one priority. And they bought in fully!

*Something happened on that first day in trios and text-based discussions that began a relationship between the staff and me. It was more than just protocols. It was a way of saying, "I heard you and I trust you." And them replying, "Thanks, we'll work with you." Leadership is interesting in that, like relationships, so much happens in the first encounter and you spend many days after either*

*fulfilling the promise or refuting the impression. Promises were made; would they be kept?*

Now, one could argue that student learning must be the number one priority, but I now contend that a leader must manage both big-picture change and smaller-picture growth, that long-term vision must be accessed through short-term gain. To tout student learning and inequity issues in the face of the staff's stated concerns would have been only self-serving. The business of a principal, as I saw it, was to serve others, and in this case the teachers first. I hear some of you say, but what of the kids. My big-picture thinking was absolutely with the kids; however, my more immediate thinking was for the staff. I interpreted their needs as wanting care, wanting respect, wanting power with boundaries, wanting tools, and like all people, wanting love. My hypothesis and decision-making guide was that if I empowered *them* in the everyday world of their work, then they would enact our school's work around student responsibility and learning.

We designed a system based loosely on an article from *Pi Delta Kappan* by Marvin Marshall on raising student responsibility. We came to consensus. We created tools for teachers, students, and parents. We taught the system in classes, at parent meetings, and at schoolwide events. We imbedded the language into everything we did, from parent letters to announcements, math lessons, and lunchroom discussions. We showed students how to be leaders in their educational and social worlds and how to engage appropriately in challenges and conflict. We taught them the relationship between behavioral choices and the subsequent consequences. We talked with them, a lot! We poured it over the school like a blanket of fresh Colorado snow and worked tirelessly to keep it from melting.

As a result, we reduced our office referrals by nearly 50%. We cut suspensions down from 61 in 03-04 to just over 40 in 04-05 with many of those from a challenging 6<sup>th</sup> grade, which by design got less of our attention and energy. I put most of my energy into the K-5 group. Curious about that? Is that inequitable? Is that plain wrong? Maybe. Would you have chosen to separate out a group in your design? Maybe not. Perfect? Not a chance. It was a huge conflict of present and future and I was very forthright with the staff about maximizing current resources for future gain. I refused to get caught in chasing our tails and as a result we (continued on page 17)

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paid a price with that grade level. However, in one year we had students, parents and teachers touting how different it “felt” to be in and around the school. And now, a month into school this year, the new principal has had very few office referrals and only two suspensions.

*Wow, the intricacies of such work and the many-layered relationship between one thing and the next boggles my mind as I sit in this distant reflection. You are only getting a glimpse of one aspect of one decision of the hundreds of things that rolled in my head last year. It was the hardest, most complicated, most taxing and most rewarding work of my career thus far. The “everydayness” of it and the effort to keep that snow from melting in the face of thousands of other state, district, local and daily issues is a dance like no other. It is hard to know how to dance in those shoes until you’ve danced in those shoes. What I wonder for NSRF is how do we get inside of the everydayness? How do we go to bed with it like the principal does every night and return to it every morning like the principal does every day? There is a safety at our distance as outside consultants and coaches. I am of the mind that unless the relationship is intimate, proximal, and constant (see: daily), then the results we seek are not likely the ones we’ll get.*

The second thing that the staff said to me in May 2004 was that they had concerns about parent involvement. You’ve heard it before—parent support, community involvement, follow-through, follow-up, and the lack of all of it. I returned to them in August with a commitment to take the lead in developing a partnership with the community. My thinking was that if they took the direct lead with students, then I could take the lead with parents and community.

This was an opportunity to push back, albeit subtly, on the teachers to challenge their perceptions and beliefs. It was a win-win opportunity to prove a few of the staff wrong that folks wouldn’t get involved in the school. I called our approach “Beyond Invitation,” and if it worked we would have both the students and the staff positively supported by our community’s involvement.

The big-picture message to our parents was that we wanted them and we needed them. The message to the community was quite simple as well. They could be a big help in supporting the children in their community. I think the difference in approach from previous times was that we didn’t

merely invite them and then get upset when they didn’t show. We went out to the community and we told them that our kids need to learn how to read better and achieve higher academically. We could do it, but we could do it better with their help. Pretty simple really.

First, I put together a team of parents (outside of PTA, which was a source of conflict early on) whose focus was to collaborate with me on community involvement for the sole purpose of increasing student achievement. Second, I joined the local Kiwanis Club, whose mission is work with children. Third, our team created a partnership with the Retired Senior Volunteer Program

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(RSVP). Fourth, I ran into a woman at Barnes and Noble who headed up a group called Spellbinders, retired folks who do storytelling for kids, and we set up a program. Fifth, a parent suggested we have the local VFW work with our kids on things like flag protocol and other areas of their expertise. Lastly, we coordinated with the

high school to bring students over to tutor and role model for the children during our more vulnerable times, like lunch and recess.

By February, we had sixteen Kiwanis folks reading with our kids before, during and after school. We had storytellers in our school every week. We had tutors from age 17 to 71. We had administrative help with phone calls, filing, and supervision. We had people running weekly lunch workshops for small groups of kids, called “Workshop Wednesdays.” I even did an eight week rock-climbing course for 12 sixth graders that culminated in a morning climb at the local rock-climbing gym. The school had come to life with the community and established a partnership toward a common end.

It made a difference. Though it is only a snapshot at our two primary focus areas last year, we know it made a difference. While in Chicago for our national facilitators’ meeting, I got a call from our instructional coach,

because the first scores (continued on page 18)



were back from our state testing that afternoon. Our third-grade reading scores had gone up by 15%, the highest gain in a district of 84 elementary schools and our school's highest score ever on third-grade reading. More stark to me was the gain in poverty-level students (free and reduced), whose scores had doubled, had cut the achievement gap from 20% to 5%. Our biggest gain came with our Latino students, who had increased from only 18% proficient to 64% proficient, making the gap now only 7% from the previous gap of 38%. In my bones, I had known it would happen, and from the Chicago hotel room that night I called each of the 4 third-grade teachers at home. We didn't say much, but we knew we had accomplished something special.

After some much deserved celebration, it was my role to create space for reflection on how something like this happened and how we might continue making it happen again and again. Lastly, it was to step back and let the teachers return to their students with a greater sense of hope and belief about what was possible.

Each gain brought up new steps needed to complete the circle. I realized over time that I could not sustain the work in my community role. I had others who could, and would, devote more time to it than myself. In March, two parents moved to the forefront of the parent/community volunteer role and we began to systematize the initial, organic work that we had done. For me, I had a thousand things playing in my mind. Do they share the big vision? And as I peel away a bit: Will they maintain it? Is it impacting student achievement? Does it support or detract from our core mission? Is it what the teachers were calling for?

By this time I had already communicated to the staff that I was leaving to spend time with my ailing father. What was so striking about that absolutely miserable and ruthless day was that it made us stronger. Through tears and disappointment, it forced us to look at sustaining the work, not just creating it.

*It is amazing how people act when they get something they wanted, how they don't want to let it go. Freedom, love, identity. All of these cannot be dangled carelessly for curious consumption. They are meant for much deeper sustenance. For the staff, it was not about their new principal, it was not about improved student responsibility, it was not about more folks in the school or about the better scores. It was about **hope**. They had tasted it,*

*ingested it and now had no interest in going hungry again.*

In the last month and a half of school we shifted a great deal of energy to prepping for the following year. That didn't mean cleaning up. It meant doing very thoughtful preparation activities with kids for the next year, teaching vigorously till the last possible minute, assessing thoughtfully to get the most accurate read on students, communicating and collaborating with other teams to design classes and schedules, setting up a literacy-based summer school, and being extremely meaningful about closure.

Your questions are probably many. Where was the staff development piece? Did you initiate CFGs? What did you do for celebrations? How did you begin to address achievement gaps and equity issues? How did you solicit the second-language families? How did you put students in roles of responsibility and leadership? How do you know if what you did is going to have lasting power and influence on the culture of the school? Good questions all and the stuff of another reflective article...□

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