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The Hard Work of School Improvement

The only place success comes before work is in the dictionary.

Vincent “Vince” Lombardi

Improvement Is Tough

Certainly, we all agree that school improvement is not easy. But why is it so tough? One of the most frustrating issues is that school improvement has no ultimate destination. School improvement is a continuous journey. This dynamic is facilitated by the fact that from year to year we are constantly working with a different group of staff and students and with varying levels of resources. This often leads educators to feel exhausted by the number of dynamic variables, many of which they find are outside of their control.

The answer to this conundrum, of course, is that we must focus on the variables that are directly within our control or at the least subject to our direct influence. By focusing on our sphere of influence, we can make decisions and quantify the great impacts we are able to realize when we institute effective practices. Fundamental to this focus is the identification of a few key practices that when implemented with fidelity can have a significant impact in the two essential areas of most concern—teaching and learning.

Another reason that school improvement is tough is that many of the variables that we seek to assess in kids are really hard to measure. For example, let's identify the broad skills such as reading and problem solving as skills that are "covert" in nature. We are really not able to directly measure such skills. Instead, we rely on using inferences produced by student performance on assessments or similar tasks to make the presence of these abilities more "overt." We are unable to peel back our kids' heads and look into their brains to directly evaluate their reading or problem-solving abilities. As a result, we rely on assessments or tests to determine the functioning level of our kids at any given moment. Based on student performance on assessments, we make inferences about what they know and are able to do and to what relative degree (Popham, 2003).

The issue with this lack of direct measurement ability means that the nature of the assessments that we do use is extremely important. But even more important are the inferences that we formulate as a result of these measurements. If the measurement does not align with the expectations that we use to make inferences in relation to our kids' cognitive ability, guess what—we make an invalid inference. Now this may not sound like that big of a deal, but what if this prevents a child from graduating from high school or from obtaining entrance to a college or training program? With the types of accountability systems that many states have adopted, the stakes are very high.

We have a moral responsibility to make certain that the assessments we are using to make decisions about student knowledge and skill levels yield inferences that are reliable and valid. Are we really measuring what we intend to measure? And even more important, does this assessment allow us to make inferences about the abilities or the lack thereof of our kids? These are additional issues that cloud the picture of school improvement. Last, for teachers to make the best use of measurement data, this data should help to clarify for teachers where students are coming into the learning (i.e., are students currently at a surface or novice level of understanding, or are they at the deep or metacognitive level of understanding). Having the ability to make these in-the-moment assessments of students is at the heart of using formative assessment for planning. This type of interaction at the collegial level is at the heart of the effective professional learning community.

Finally, the plethora of activities taking place in schools must mean that we are about the business of making gains in student achievement and in staff-driven engagement in improving effectiveness, right? Not so fast. More often than not, what we find is the frantic activity

of what John Kotter (2008) calls a “false sense of urgency,” which is because of the pressure applied in the *carrot-and-stick* accountability systems employed in a majority of states today (p. 23). We have meetings (sometimes about meetings), we check all the boxes, we create the 500-page literacy plans, but here’s the question: Does this amount of sheer activity lead to improved results? Realistically, this type of frenzied activity—the need to do it all—and do it now—usually leads to burnout and lowered morale. When it comes to school improvement, *more* is certainly not correlated with *better*. The use of fewer but more effective practices implemented deeply and successfully is how schools improve. As Lou Holtz, the famous football coach said, “A coach never lost a football game because they did not have enough plays.” Schools do not fail because they do not have enough initiatives in place. They succeed by using highly impactful practices that are implemented effectively and with fidelity. In addition, how educators think about their work also has an exponential impact on the outcomes of that work. The “right” actions, and the appropriate thought processes that guide those actions, are what have proved time and again to help drive improved student results.

John Hattie (2009) speaks of this idea of focus in his book *Visible Learning* where he synthesizes more than 800 meta-analyses about the variables associated with schools that have the greatest impact on student achievement. Any system has a finite amount of resources. Whether we are talking about financial capital, physical capital, or cognitive capital, we can focus deeply on a few items at one time. The finite nature of resources reinforces the need for focusing on fewer priorities. Hattie (2012) also found that the way that people think about their work, through what he termed “mind frames” can have a powerful effect on the impact that school leaders and teachers have within schools. According to Hattie,

It is a set of mind frames that underpin our every action and decision in a school: it is a belief that we are evaluators, change agents, adaptive learning experts, seekers of feedback about our impact, engaged in dialogue and challenge, and developers of trust with all, and that we see opportunity in error . . . (2012, p. 159)

This important concept about how we think about our work also underpins the key driver and supports the architecture of the professional learning community (PLC) and the implementation of *The Focus Model* (TFM). DuFour, DuFour, and Eaker (2008) discuss six vital characteristics, similar to Hattie’s (2012) mind-frames, which are related to

the conception of how we think about our work. The six key characteristics common to all professional learning communities (PLCs) are

1. a combination of shared mission, vision, and goals all focused on student learning that drive the actions of the team.
2. a collaborative culture with the purpose of improving teaching and learning.
3. a collective look at what is working “best,” and the current reality of where learning is presently for all students and adults.
4. an orientation surrounding the conception that adult action can have dramatic positive impact on student learning outcomes.
5. an orientation toward student learning outcomes as the measurement criteria of success.
6. a commitment to continuous improvement through deliberative practice and the drive to constantly measure adult impact by looking at student learning.

The goal of TFM is that we learn to focus by designing effective PLCs that are aimed at using a few high leverage practices within the confines of collaboration to solve issues related to teaching and learning. As Troen and Boles (2012) concluded, “what teachers are unable to accomplish alone, or only with great difficulty, they can accomplish more successfully in a team” (p. 7). If schools are left to focus by default, we find that they typically keep piling on one “flavor-of-the-month” initiative after another until things begin to fall off the proverbial plate. The most pressing issue arises when one of the most critical and effective research-informed strategies is one of the practices that fall by the wayside. TFM promotes a mindset of focusing on fewer research-informed practices and learning to implement those practices more effectively. As James Popham (2003) so aptly phrased, “We measure what we treasure” (p. 108). Due to our incessant grasping for the next “magic-bullet” initiative, we communicate to stakeholders that everything is a priority. In reality, what we are truly communicating is that we have no priorities. Failure is sure to be our fate when we fail to focus. This iteration of the PLC that is most concerned with monitoring educators’ impact on teaching and learning is called an *Impact-Professional Learning Community (I-PLC)* and is the driver that supports TFM. Thus, the major focus of the I-PLC is the search for positive and negative evidence for the impact of instructional decisions on student and adult learning. The three

central practices that are supported by the I-PLC within TFM are the development of clear learning intentions, success criteria, and the effective implementation of formative assessment practices.

It is more likely that we can and will enjoy the fruits of our labor, when we have a collaborative structure in place like the I-PLC, which is grounded in appropriate mind-frames that allow us to focus on key aspects of learning and to seek the impact of our instructional decisions. The key is to focus on a limited number of priorities supporting learning for students and adults so that we can support those priorities with effective professional development, monitoring, and follow-through. The solution is implementation of a process that creates a learning system. Have you ever started an initiative within the school with great fanfare and excitement only to have it fizzle away soon after the launch? Undoubtedly you have experienced this phenomenon in some form or fashion. It is more often than not the doomed initiative's fate because we tried to launch new programs amid the wreckage of numerous previous programs that still litter the landscape of our schools like sedimentary rock. The answer is to develop plans with limited numbers of strategies and goals so that we can muster the human, physical, and financial resources to provide them the care and nutrition required for them to grow and we can focus on building a system that is dedicated to learning. Additionally, having a structure in place, such as the I-PLC, which allows for follow-up, monitoring, and the development of individual and collective accountability for results is also critical for school improvement and the development of a systemic learning organization.

Improvement Requires Perseverance

If asked for a simple “yes” or “no” to the following questions about your school or district, how would you respond?

1. Do all educators, at all levels of the system, currently have a common conception of what it is we want all students, at all grade levels, to know and be able to do?
2. Do all educators, at all levels of the system, currently have a common conception of progress for all students on these important student-learning outcomes?
3. Do all educators, at all levels of the system, currently have effective formative assessment structures in place, at all grade levels, that allow real time instructional decisions driven by evidence of impact?

If you were able to answer yes to all three of these questions, I would first like to say, “Congratulations,” because your school improvement plan is worth millions! If your answer was no to any one of the questions, then you are in good company—along with about 99.9 percent of the other schools in the United States. What that really means is that even if your school is ranked as a “high-performing” school, there remains room for improvement.

As previously mentioned, one of the most frustrating aspects of school improvement is that it is a continuous journey. This author likens it to stopping a leak in a dam holding water. When you stop the flow of water in one area, lo and behold, another spot gives way. This analogy illustrates the reason behind why having a few key strategies and goals that you can truly keep a handle on is so important. Also in order to create success, educators must be willing to maintain their focus on those effective practices. In their latest book, *Great by Choice*, Jim Collins and Morten Hansen (2011) refer to this imperative maintenance as *fanatic discipline*.

In the book, much like in another book by Collins (2001) titled *Good to Great* (2011), Collins and Hansen performed comparative analyses on companies with all major variables relatively the same but in the end took different paths when it came to success, or a lack thereof. One of the attributes of the companies that were overtly successful was the fact that they maintained focus on those few aspects that gave them the greatest results for the investment of time and resources. This reinforces the idea of focusing on what matters most. Schools invariably must maintain focus on learning. This learning is just as important for the adults as it is for the students.

Quality Over Quantity

When it comes to school improvement, there is no shortage of initiatives for sale in this day and age of mass marketing. It is no wonder that multitudes of teachers and leaders are incessantly bombarded with the next “big saving solution.” In his 2009 seminal work, *Visible Learning*, what John Hattie finds even more troublesome, is that if we set the bar at zero in regard to initiatives having a positive effect size on student achievement, then pretty much everything “works.” So we have multitudes of salespeople waving banners, literally, exclaiming, “Buy our product or strategy; it *works*.” However, Hattie’s findings reveal that the mere fact of a child just gaining 1 year of age,

with the corresponding maturity that comes with that year, could have noticeable positive effects on student achievement.

Hattie (2009) makes it clear that when dealing with programs or products, we should ask more than the simple question, “Does it work?” Instead, and more significantly ask exactly how well does it work? If implemented with fidelity, what might we expect to be the positive impact on student achievement in a given year? The question then becomes not simply “What works?” but “What works best?”

The following chapters introduce four effective practices—yes, that is not a misprint, just *four* effective practices that have proved successful time and time again by multiple schools, multiple researchers, and multiple teachers and their students. These practices are the following:

1. Determining Critical Learning Intentions
2. Developing Success Criteria
3. Introducing Formative Analysis Related to Learning Intentions and Success Criteria
4. Developing Impact-Professional Learning Communities (I-PLCs), which are collaborative groups, formed to search for the effect and evidence of impact of adult actions on student learning, thus utilizing this knowledge and evidence to inform professional practice and to improve student learning.

Now, because this list is rather brief, it might lead one to the conclusion that there is nothing to school improvement. Once again, this author cautions, “Not so fast, my friend.” Over the next few chapters, this book shares the effective practices that hold the power to help in any school setting (public, private, parochial, home school, and college or university) and to accelerate and improve student achievement. The only ingredient that is not included in this volume is the hard work that this process requires. The bright side is that schools, teachers, and leaders are already working very hard. Is there a way that we can refocus this work on learning in such a way to promote student growth and a renewal in teacher efficacy? There certainly is, and over the next chapters, a plan to do just that unfolds, but first a little more groundwork on a couple of important caveats before we get into the four foundational practices of TFM.

Teacher-Driven Improvement

The first point to emphasize is that school improvement has to take place in the classroom. School improvement is not something that is cooked up in some laboratory and sprinkled on faculty, staff, and kids. The people who have the most influence on student achievement within our schools, the teachers, must drive improvement. With this finding comes great responsibility on the part of teachers. Hattie (2012) asserts,

The act of teaching requires deliberate intervention to ensure that there is cognitive change in the student; thus the key ingredients are being aware of the learning intentions, knowing when a student is successful in attaining those intentions . . . and knowing enough about the content . . . so that there is some sort of progressive development. (p. 16)

All these important aspects are inherently addressed in TFM.

Many professional development providers have gone astray by trying to “teacher-proof” school improvement strategies or programs. How can this be? Effective practices will always rule the day, not bloated three-ring binders that fit very neatly on the classroom shelf, never to be lifted again once the pitter-patter of the “spray and pray” professional development session is over.

The power of the strategies that are presented here is that they are all inherently effective because they are teacher driven. No bureaucrats needed! It is not that our political leaders are not important stakeholders, but we have to support and engage our teachers if true sustainable improvement in our schools is our goal.

People who stand before teachers and exclaim that they should be able to teach to mastery every single standard in the voluminous curriculum frameworks and have enough time to reteach and reassess as needed are not living in the same world that teachers live in on a daily basis. Normally, the people who espouse this nonsense to teachers are three or four levels removed from the classroom. It is time to wake up, America. The wheel is spinning, but the hamster is dead! Now, this author knows that to some people, what was just said could be considered tantamount to sacrilege. Hear me out; this author does not advocate eliminating standards, but does advocate taking a reasoned approach to ensure that we spend the time needed to clearly define learning intentions and success criteria so that our kids, and our educators, have the clarity needed to learn more effectively and deeply. For the sake of our kids, let’s agree to make learning the constant and time the variable that we are willing to manipulate.

Classroom Performance as Measure of Success

The idea of school improvement as teacher-driven can be considered foreign in today's competitive world of new age initiatives, but the classroom should be the true measure of success. What effect can a teacher have on a child from the time that child walks into the room at the beginning of the year until the last day of the school year? This should be the measure of accountability for the effectiveness of a teacher. Any other type of measurement assumes that kids are like potted plants, with the assumptions that all the plants have the exact same requirements of sunshine, water, and temperature and that all the plants come to the nursery in the same state of health—none of them suffering from a lack of sunshine or nutrients, but all at the exact same level of fitness. You know, come to think of it, this line of thinking does not even hold for potted plants. Why in the world would we expect it to work for kids? But this is exactly the type of accountability system that the majority of states have implemented over the past few years.

This author hopes to shed some light on how to make this type of accountability more visible so that we can support the hard work of teachers within classrooms to help all kids achieve the intended learning outcomes at the proficient level regardless of the type of standard or the grade level. But before this author talks about the four core effective practices of TFM, just a few more insights on the ideas of focus, effective monitoring, and efficacy.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

It is not the number of initiatives that a school has in place that ultimately leads to success or failure. Invariably, it is the quality of the few initiatives with deep implementation that has the greatest potential for positive effect on teaching and learning. In addition, the way that educators think about the work also has a great impact on the outcomes of their work. School improvement is not a spectator sport. It takes effective practices deeply implemented by all involved. With positive results comes the opportunity to make the cultural changes that are needed to foster sustainability of improvement efforts. We all have a part to play.

Guiding Questions

1. If you survey all the faculty and staff in your school or district, how many initiatives are perceived to be in place at this time?

2. Do all stakeholders know your current priorities? Are some of the initiatives identified by staff no longer considered “in place”?
3. Can you directly link these initiatives to quantifiable improvements in student results? Does this level of improvement justify the investment of time, personnel, and money?
4. How do you currently measure the success of initiatives in relation to student results?
5. How do you measure implementation? Are you truly implementing these initiatives with fidelity?
6. Are all teachers clear about what students should learn from grade to grade?
7. Are all teachers clear about what it means to be proficient on these important student-learning outcomes? Do teachers have a common conception of progress? What about students?
8. What structures are in place that ensure educators in your school or district know the impact of their professional practice on student-learning outcomes?

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