

Platform for School Improvement

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Core values for education are the foundation of what students should know when they exit our public schools. These core values explain what education stands for, guide instruction, direct decision making, and establish a base for all strategies and ideas in the organization. In other words, core values tell us why we teach what we teach. Important core values of education include integrity, respect, cooperation, communication, innovation, problem solving, sense of community, and professionalism.

Education is in the midst of reform. School reform means that there are issues that need addressed and changed so that the education system in the United States will prepare students for their future rather than for our past (Bearden, 2011). As it is currently organized, the education system is no longer as effective as it once was because it continues to train students using approaches that worked historically rather than adapting to the global impact of the world today (Wagner, 2008). The aim of education should be the creation of lifelong learners that are able to contribute positively to society. School improvement should connect the aim of education to the aforementioned core values. In order to make this connection, school reform needs to focus on several goals.

One goal for school reform is to turn around low performing schools. There are schools that do not reach basic expectations consistently. Many of these schools are in areas of poverty. They need to focus on improving instruction. In order to do this, a strong leadership needs to be put into place that can guide the staff and help the staff see the need for a commitment to change (Herman, Dawson, Dee, Greene, Maynard, Redding, & Darwin, 2008). Data can show baseline and results, but staff morale and stakeholder involvement is also important (Slavin, Holmes, Madden, Chamberlain, & Cheung, 2010).

Not only do we need to focus on schools that are low performing, but we also need to address individual students that are unmotivated, have emotional and behavioral issues, and are academically low. This may mean changes in the traditional course offerings to include classes that allow for emphasis on student strengths (i.e. music, art, cooking, or athletics.) It may also mean formatting classrooms differently so students become empowered in their education through access to others through the internet

or community so they can relate classroom learning to their future goals (Lane, Wehby, & Barton-Arwood, 2005 and Daly, 2004). These methods will not only help those who are failing to thrive in school, but they can also be advantageous for those students who are achieving at expectations but could be challenged at a different level (Finn & Petrilli, 2008).

It is important for all school improvement initiatives to promote change through strong leadership. This may mean a change in roles for staff members as opportunities for student engagement are restructured (Learning Point Associates, 2010). Parents, students, and educators should no longer find the status quo acceptable. This may mean educators take sabbaticals at intervals throughout their teaching career in order to do research, refine their profession, and gain new insight through experiences beyond the classroom (Denning, 2011). As teachers show their passion for teaching, students will be given fresh opportunities to develop skills and become lifelong learners.

Technology is another issue that needs addressed. Students are connected to the world through technology, and yet we tell them to turn it all off when they enter the school building. Within the classrooms technology (i.e. Smart Boards) are often used as “teacher aides” rather than real learning tools for students. Students and teachers should use mobiles and cloud computing on a daily basis to collaborate with other learners and professionals (Friedman, 2005). There are indicators that these innovations will be a part of our classrooms within the next couple of years (Daly, 2007). When students have access to the internet, they can acquire material and information in order to deepen their understanding of various topics. This creates a passion for learning, as well as an avenue to teach the core value of innovation. Since students will be using technology for communicating in this global system, utilization during school prepares students for their future by teaching appropriateness of interactions and creative problem solving.

Through game based learning, students can continue to explore problem solving. Games for education foster the core value of collaboration as well as integrity (Johnson, Adams, & Haywood, 2011).

They help engage students in the process of learning and can be a good type of formative assessment. Game based learning can utilize data collection systems as students' progress through standards tied in with the various games. As a result, they can simplify a teacher's accountability system for student progress.

Stakeholders are an integral part of school reform. The federal government provides funding for a free and appropriate education for all students. Although this is determined by complex formulas that determine how money is distributed for students with special needs, low performing schools, and other circumstances, the system should be consistent enough for educational leaders to understand. The federal government should also allow districts and schools the ability to try new strategies to help low performing schools succeed. Some of these may first be adopted in charter schools as pilot programs; with success, they can be utilized by the public schools with similar clientele (Dillon, 2011).

States have the role of developing curricular goals while giving individual districts the ability to determine how they will reach these goals. The goals should be simplified so all educators can understand their intent, and so they are able to be reached within one school year for each grade level. This means, many states need to simplify and refine their curriculum. At the state level, curriculum needs to be general enough to be applicable for all districts within the state. Assessments and accountability need to be tied to the basic curriculum. However, these assessments should be for overall school effectiveness rather than individual student scores, remembering Goodhart's law that states when measures become the goal, they stop being effective measures for achievement (Denning, 2011).

Districts need to have a strong school board that administrates the business and affairs of the schools while providing individual schools the freedom to implement programs. The superintendent should guide the staff, parents, and students to understand the need for change before new programs are implemented. He should be available for overseeing district level strategic plans that affect each local school at every level within the district. Districts should also establish assessments for individual accountability that is

formative rather than summative and leads to guidance for better classroom instruction for individual students. They need to show where students can expand and improve their knowledge (Denning, 2011).

Within the district, school administration should build the culture of the school. This is based on the community, the ability levels, and the needs of all students within their walls. It also depends on the abilities and needs of the teachers. A good school level administrator promotes a positive attitude that is self-supporting and self-guiding within the building. There is a support and confidence generated when teachers know the overall school goals and they also know how to smile at their students. It is the school's administration team that builds a committed staff. That commitment leads to the ability to carry out a well-developed school improvement plan.

Teachers directly influence their students. They need to be a role model, a cheerleader, and a facilitator for each child's education. They need to be flexible enough to modify their techniques without modifying the content for those students they serve. Students need to take responsibility for completing assignments, delving into subjects deeper, and questioning the information presented in order to gain a deeper understanding. Parents should support this endeavor as well as the school. They should hold their children accountable for their academics and behavior by supporting the student even during difficult times. Parents should make themselves available to transport students either before or after school if extra help is needed, come to school meetings, and attend school functions such as Open Houses and concerts.

The community is often a forgotten stakeholder, but they may be one of the most important. Community businesses need to relate qualities they need in their employees to their school district in order to develop a plan for the future needs of the community. They should work with the schools as a partnership, even having professionals go into classrooms and work directly with teachers as appropriate on certain topics. Community businesses can also help schools by providing release time for their employees to attend school functions without fear of reprimand or job loss, no matter what the position.

School districts currently struggle with finances. However, this is no excuse not to meet the needs of students, both now and in the future. In order to do so, funds must be reallocated to provide the necessary tools for an education that prepares students for their future. This may mean something as simple as reallocating textbook funds to technology, so all students can receive their textbooks on a digital reader or tablet. It can also mean reallocating staff members. For example, paraprofessionals may give up copy duties in order to support teachers and students in individual classrooms. Time may also be reallocated, possibly reducing quantity of teacher time with students in order to give more time for staff development, planning, collaboration with other professionals. This could improve the quality of lessons leading to higher student achievement and less stress on staff members.

Overall, schools should be a place where students go to learn about the world around them. Schools should be a safe haven for academic experimentation and growth (Horner, Sugai, & Anderson, 2010). They should provide a model for professionalism with every staff member, from the administration to the janitors. Students should be taught lifelong lessons in integrity and respect as they work with the community at their school. They should develop skills in communication and cooperation, both through working with others face to face as well as collaborating and problem solving with others through the internet. As a result, students will be ready to innovate and achieve in the world we have yet to discover.

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