

# TEPSA News

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## Best Practices/Tom W. Many, Ed.D.

### Inspire a Lasting Commitment to Learning

*“People don’t buy what you do, they buy why you do it.” -Simon Sinek*

In his book entitled *Start With Why*, Simon Sinek suggests that too many leaders begin by describing WHAT an organization does before understanding WHY doing it is important. His belief is that when leaders begin with WHAT they generate compliance. When leaders begin with WHY they inspire commitment.

*“WHY represents a belief, HOW are the actions we take to realize that belief, and WHAT is the result of those actions.” -Simon Sinek*

Inspiring a lasting commitment to student learning begins with understanding WHY. Many schools can describe WHAT they do and some can explain HOW they do it but only a few can articulate WHY they do what they do. According to Sinek, “People do not buy WHAT you do, they buy WHY you do it.” If principals cannot clearly articulate the reasons WHY a school exists beyond its courses, programs and activities, how will the faculty, parents or students? Clearly articulating the WHY is one of a principal’s primary responsibilities.

Principals can ensure that faculty align their practice with the purpose of their school but inspiring lasting commitment requires that principals *first* engage in an effort to

articulate the fundamental purpose of their school. When principals engage teachers in a conversation about the WHY before working on the WHAT it becomes much easier to align a school’s policies, practices and procedures with the things that really matter.

School improvement efforts benefit from the alignment of WHAT we do with WHY we do it, but effective principals understand that it is much more than alignment. These principals understand that an aligned system operating in the absence of a deep understanding of WHY is at best compliant. On the other hand, an engaged system operating in the presence of a deep understanding of WHY is committed to student learning. According to Sinek, “The WHAT is important for it provides tangible proof of what we do, but the WHY *must* come first.”

Once a faculty is clear about WHY it is important to engage in best practices around learning the question becomes HOW to do it? According to Sinek, HOW represents the values, principles, and parameters that guide how teachers successfully implement school improvement initiatives. For example, if teachers believe engaging in formative assessment is such a powerful practice that no individual or team of teachers should be allowed to opt out of using them on a daily basis, the question is not **if** but **how** and the focus of conversation shifts to what resources—time, money, training, and personnel—are needed to make the practice universal.

In schools generating high levels of commitment—as opposed to compliance—the question of HOW is grounded in a widely shared and deeply held understanding of WHY. To paraphrase Sinek, teachers cannot know HOW if they do not know WHY. With a shared understanding of WHY it matters and agreement on HOW it might be implemented, WHAT the initiative will look like quickly falls into place.



The best way to inspire buy-in and a lasting commitment to high levels of learning for all is to set aside time for collaborative teams to reflect, discuss, consider, and eventually understand the reasons WHY it is important to do what they do. If we truly want our students to succeed, principals must consciously create opportunities for teachers to understand the many nuances of their practice.

*“The WHAT is important for it provides tangible proof of what we do, but the WHY must come first.” –Simon Sinek*

We had first hand experience with this important idea in Kildeer Countryside Community Consolidated School District 96 while working to improve our intervention programs. Principals and teachers explored WHY offering a schoolwide and systematic pyramid of intervention during the regular school day was important to student learning. Consensus was reached and it was agreed that more time and support would be beneficial but as the faculty examined the master schedule it became clear that students could not access the pyramid of interventions without missing direct instruction in other classes. Together, the faculty and administration began to explore ways to resolve this conflict.

There were a few important parameters that guided the faculty’s work. First, a viable solution was expected—the status quo was not acceptable. Second, the desired solution needed to allow all students access to intervention programs. Third, the solution needed to be affordable. Finally, all alternatives would be thoroughly evaluated by all but once a new schedule was proposed and adopted, everyone was expected to embrace and actively support its implementation.

Teachers were encouraged to find out how other schools were providing time for interventions during the regular school day and many alternatives were considered but the solution of how to provide students with greater access to interventions came from the faculty. Teachers suggested that shaving three minutes off each period two days a week could create a period for interventions during the regular school day. By reallocating class time to interventions, the faculty demonstrated how the pyramid of interventions might fit into the daily schedule.

With a deep understanding of WHY access to more time and support mattered and a clear idea of HOW it could be accomplished during the regular school day, the faculty immediately began to create the actual intervention modules that would be offered by whom and at what times.

*“Knowing WHY is not the only way to be successful, but it is the only way to maintain a lasting success.”  
–Simon Sinek*

In any endeavor, it is important to know what you are doing and how to do it well but if lasting and sustained commitment to student learning is the goal, it is far more important to help teachers understand why they do what they are doing. No matter how noble the idea or well intentioned the effort, regardless of whether the approach is enthusiastic and determined, or if the roll out is well planned and carefully scripted; starting school improvement efforts with the WHAT before getting clear on the WHY rarely results in success.

Yes, teachers need stories, examples and descriptions of WHAT others are doing with respect to a new initiative. And yes, teachers will benefit from opportunities to see HOW the initiative looks in operation, how others are implementing the change, and how this new initiative will impact their teaching. But, before teachers will accept or commit to a new initiative, they need to develop a deep understanding of WHY. ■

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#### **Resources**

Sinek, S. (2009). *Start With Why: How Great Leaders Inspire Everyone To Take Action*. Penguin Group, Inc: New York, NY.