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



“There are simple, proven, affordable structures that exist right now that could have a dramatic impact on achievement in virtually any school. An astonishing level of agreement has emerged on this point.” -Schmoker

We know what works; in fact, there has never been a clearer consensus or greater agreement on what schools must do to positively impact student learning. The importance of a guaranteed and viable curriculum, common formative assessments and systematic pyramids of intervention is not up for debate. Neither is the idea that teachers should work together interdependently on collaborative teams.

If the goal is high levels of learning for all students, these are not optional activities—they are required — and the most effective principals focus their time and energy on the high leverage strategies of a PLC because they understand those represent the methodologies most likely to ensure high levels of learning for students.

“There are no simple rules for finding high-leverage changes, but there are ways of thinking that make it more likely (Senge, 1990, p. 65)”

Donella Meadows encourages leaders to look for opportunities to improve their schools by identifying specific

leverage points or places “where a small shift in one thing can produce big changes in everything.” And according to Peter Senge, a good place to begin looking for leverage points is within an organization’s structures.

Sometimes a leverage point is not within the individual strategies themselves, but in the way several strategies are assembled or integrated together. Other times, a leverage point is found by emphasizing organizational priorities by applying a fresh approach to an old structure. At times a leverage point is found in the data and measurement of specific outcomes. Almost always, a principal’s leverage increases as conversations move towards people’s values, attitudes and beliefs.

In schools, leverage points are the purposeful actions or changes principals make in the structures (policies, practices and procedures) of their schools that result in higher levels of learning for students. A leverage point is an actionable, conscious and intentional decision within the purview of, achievable by, and driven by the building

principal. According to Senge, one of the critical competencies of effective leaders is “seeing where actions and small changes in structures can lead to significant, enduring improvements.”

Leverage points represent powerful opportunities for principals and identifying those small, seemingly insignificant actions that have a profound and positive impact on your school is the leader’s challenge. To illustrate the concept of leverage points, consider the following structural changes principals can make to promote higher levels of learning for their students.

Create a Master Schedule that Reflects the Priorities of High Leverage Strategies

The way principals assemble and integrate priorities into the school’s master schedule represents a powerful leverage point. Whenever we visit schools, we ask to see a copy of the master schedule and look for two things. First, is there evidence that at least one hour a week is set aside for teachers to meet during the regular school day? This designated and protected team time promotes development of a collaborative culture. Second, we verify that opportunities exist for students to access more time and support without missing direct instruction in the core subject areas. Schedules that reflect this priority support the development of schoolwide and systematic pyramids of intervention.

A master schedule that reflects time for both collaboration and pyramids of intervention is an example of a leverage point. The principal’s leverage comes from the integration of priorities to ensure the school’s policies, practices and procedures align with the high leverage strategies of collaborative teams and interventions. Because teams are provided with time to meet they are better able to identify struggling students by name and need. When leveraged, these two ideas make for a powerful combination.

Change the Focus of Traditional Faculty Meetings

Creating a focus on learning is another high leverage strategy that principals can support by shifting the tone and tenor of traditional faculty meetings from logistics to learning. Instead of sharing what amounts to verbal memos, effective principals consciously choose to use faculty meetings for professional learning. Minimizing time spent reviewing procedural issues in order to maximize time spent sharing best practices is a small change that represents a powerful leverage point to reinforce learning as the fundamental purpose of the school.

Repurposing faculty meetings is an example of how principals find leverage by using a fresh approach to an old structure. In this example, changing the focus of the traditional faculty meeting creates priceless opportunities for additional training and job embedded staff development.

Create Meaningful Collaborative Teams

Another powerful leverage point is realized by simply requiring every teacher—including special education teachers—to be members of meaningful collaborative teams. Research has shown that making the small change of adding special education teachers on regular education teams improves the pedagogy of **both** regular and special education teachers. The instructional strategies designed to help students with disabilities also help students without disabilities, thus regular education teachers benefit from the professional expertise of special educators and vice versa.

Working together in this new teaming structure dissolves the false dichotomy between regular and special education teachers and provides an opportunity for teachers to examine their beliefs around the idea that **all** kids can learn.

Create a Schoolwide Schedule for Common Assessments

Principals find that leverage comes from measurement—the identification of which students were successful and which strategies were most effective—which allows teams to use data to drive instruction. The simple act of publishing a schedule targeting when teams will administer common assessments is a purposeful action that ensures formative data will be available to teams. Publishing and monitoring an assessment schedule is a leverage point clearly within every principal’s ability to influence.

Leverage (using the least amount of energy to generate the greatest amount of change), is operationalized by identifying specific leverage points (small structural changes that results in significant and lasting improvement) within the system. Principals put themselves in the best position to benefit from the high-leverage strategies of a PLC by looking for leverage points in the structures of their school. ■



Dr. Tom Many is an author and consultant. His career in education spans more than 30 years.

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