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Best Practices/Tom Many, EdD and Dan Cohan

Staying the Course

100

*Day Plans Sustain a Culture
of Continuous Improvement*

The importance of creating a culture of continuous improvement to support sustained school improvement is well documented. More specifically, well-crafted, short-cycle improvement plans keep schools focused and moving in the right direction long after the excitement of the first day of school has come and gone.

“Continuous improvement is better than delayed perfection.” -Mark Twain

Clear and transparent Hundred Day Plans (the kind of school improvement plan we are advocating) play a significant role in creating and sustaining a culture of continuous improvement in schools. The most effective principals begin their school improvement planning the year before implementation. Each spring, the mantra “let April inform August” echoes through the hallways as teachers and administrators use student achievement data and other indicators to evaluate progress and identify ‘next steps.’

A well-crafted Hundred Day Plan carefully describes changes that will occur in adult practice and dialogue during the upcoming school year. These plans identify a school’s Greatest Area of Need, create a Theory of Action,

define specific S.M.A.R.T. Goals, generate agreed upon Action Plans and a Communication Plan; all expressed in specific increments of time throughout the year. By design, well-written Hundred Day Plans outline the specific expectations for faculty and administrative staff and monitor progress by examining artifacts at designated checkpoints during the first 100 days of the school year.

Hundred Day Plans provide an effective and efficient time frame for school improvement. As the authors pointed out in an earlier article entitled “More Than Wishful Thinking, Using Hundred Day Plans to Achieve School Goals” (*TEPSA News*, September/October 2012), “It takes about one hundred days for the impact of your actions to become clear... These short cycle [Hundred Day] plans describe the desired outcomes, identify the necessary resources and assign key responsibilities over a specified period of time.” The typical 100-day cycle begins in August and concludes around the beginning of February, right before many schools and districts engage in state and national assessments. This specific, targeted time frame provides an authentic benchmark to evaluate the success of the current school improvement plan.

“Unless commitment is made, there are only promises and hopes; but no plans.” -Peter F. Drucker

Many schools are seeing significant progress in creating a culture of continuous improvement by implementing Hundred Day Plans. Based on our experience, we’ve identified a few key points all principals and teacher leaders should consider when creating these powerful plans.

- 1. Gauge the level of commitment.** The best Hundred Day Plans reflect goals teachers are committed to achieving. Steve Barkley argues the development of any school improvement plan *begins* with assessing the degree to which teachers are united in their desire to reach the identified goals. Real improvement requires real commitment.
- 2. Keep the focus narrow.** Hundred Day Plans should focus on a few (one or two) goals. Teacher teams can do anything, but they can’t do everything and while it is true that, “what gets monitored get done,” there is no truth to the notion that, “the more we monitor the more we will get done.” A common mistake seen in many school improvement plans is the inclusion of too many goals.
- 3. Choose attainable goals.** Hundred Day Plans should be attainable. Big stretch goals are great but achieving a series of smaller goals will motivate the faculty and staff far more than failing to reach a single, big goal. For example, the goal of becoming a PLC is admirable but it is far too complex to accomplish in 100 days; many highly successful schools have worked for years to develop, refine and improve their PLC practices. Choosing a more realistic goal like learning how to design valid and reliable common assessments builds capacity and allows the faculty to focus their efforts, develop their skills, and gain confidence.
- 4. Involve the faculty from the start.** Hundred Day Plans should motivate teachers to take action. Engaging the faculty in the process of reviewing data, identifying the greatest areas of need, and articulating improvement goals is critical to generating a sense of ownership.

“Without involvement there is no commitment. Mark it down, asterisk it, circle it, and underline it. No involvement, no commitment” -Steven Covey

We have learned involving teachers in crafting Hundred Day Plans is essential. As Sharon Ivie, principal at Green Mountain Elementary School in Jefferson County, Colorado explains, “Creating the plan starts with the principal and a guiding coalition but the plan must become a belief shared by more people than just those in positions of leadership. Involving everyone in developing the plan ensures that no one thinks the plan is something being done to them.” It’s clear; the meaningful involvement of the faculty ensures the school improvement planning process is as important as the product.

Questions asked while developing Hundred Day Plans may include such things as, “Can the faculty and staff effectively articulate and communicate the key areas of focus as identified by our school improvement plan?” and “Do we know these areas of need and the corresponding action steps they must take at the beginning of the school year?” As K.C. Somers, another principal in Jefferson County says, “The whole reason for Hundred Day Plans is to make sure nothing happens by accident. Everything is deliberate and the plan allows us to ensure a high level of conscious and purposeful intentionality.”

Steve Barkley also believes questions can help highlight the intentionality of a well-designed Hundred Day Plan. He suggests asking things like, “What leadership actions have we purposefully taken in this first month to communicate, initiate, and support the changes needed in staff to gain our needed changes in student learning production behaviors? What unplanned/spontaneous actions provided reinforcement? Are there any unconscious decisions/actions we took that may have communicated a conflicting or incongruous message? What purposeful actions are we planning for the next month?”

“Plans are nothing. Planning is everything.”
-Albert Einstein

According to Somers, engaging teachers in the process of crafting Hundred Day Plans helps sustain school improvement efforts throughout the year. He observed that, “involving teachers in the Hundred Day planning process has really helped all staff understand our current reality.” As schools reach day 100, teachers and administrators celebrate progress, communicate with stakeholders, and return with “boorish redundancy” to the essential concepts and processes that drive school improvement efforts. ■

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Resources

- Barkley, S. (2016, September 18). “Instructional Coaching and School Improvement Plans.” Steve Barkley Ponders Out Loud. Available at <http://barkleypd.com/blog/instructional-coaching-school-improvement-plans/>.
- Many, T. (2012, September/October). “More Than Wishful Thinking: Using Hundred Day Plans to Achieve School Goals.” *TEPSA News*, Vol. 69 (5).