

**Change,  
Setbacks,  
and  
Transform**

A new principal takes on the challenge  
of transforming a struggling school.

**By Alex Magaña**

A man in a dark t-shirt and shorts is climbing a rugged rock face. He is wearing a climbing harness with various tools and a rope. The background is a bright, warm sunset sky. The word "mation" is written in large, white, lowercase letters across the middle of the image.

# mation

**I** became principal of a struggling Grant Beacon Middle School in Denver midway through the 2010 school year after our principal was promoted. While the challenges I faced are common to principals across the country, I had been comfortable in my role as assistant principal and was feeling apprehensive about making the changes I knew needed to be made. It was difficult to discern the right moment for change: If I moved too quickly, I would fail, and if I moved too fast, I was destined to lose teachers and students along the way.

It has not been an easy journey, but with help from a committed team of educators, parents, and community leaders, I have had the most enriching and rewarding five years of my career. During this time, we've implemented a successful blended learning program that is a model for the rest of the district. And thanks to a longer school day, we have added more than 50 enrichment programs.

### Starting Point

When I was named principal, Grant Beacon was in the state and district's low category for standardized test scores. Sixty percent of our students were coming in below proficiency and only 10 percent were attending any after-school program. Enrollment was declining, and many parents in the middle class community where our school is located did not want to send their children to a school where the perceived "bad" students were being bused in from the other neighborhood in our boundary area.

Later that year, we found out we were in yellow "watch" status because of our standardized test scores. The situation grew more desperate

after the school board unanimously approved and announced that a new high-tech charter school supported by the community was opening nearby. This meant that our enrollment would likely take another hit—as would the academic gains we were tirelessly trying to make. The district had already closed other schools with similar demographic and enrollment trends. Thus, the future for the school as we knew it was not looking good.

### The Path to Change

Although I understood the attraction of a new high-tech middle school, our staff also knew our survival depended on how we responded to this potential setback. Our path to change was through Colorado's recent law allowing schools to apply for innovation status, which gives schools greater autonomy from the state and district, allowing more decision-making power regarding people, time, and money.

First, though, I had to make a case to my staff about becoming an innovation school, which would require a 60 percent staff approval. In 2011, we formed an innovation team of parents, commu-

nity members, and teachers to gather input, build consensus, and continue to provide a strong academic program for existing students and families. Anyone was welcome as long as they honored the norms of our meetings, came with ideas, and reported out to their constituents. For the entire 2011-2012 school year, we met every other week for an hour after school and spent hours reviewing data and discussing what was best for the school.

"Throughout this process, we engaged stakeholders, even when the conversations were really tough, and went through a process that shifted our mindset to re-imagine how school schedules and curricula could look different to benefit students and teachers," says Michelle Saab, the school's dean of students. "Change, setbacks, and transformation are the true test of a school leader."

We collected data from the staff, community, and parents. Our parents asked community members with young children what they wanted from their local middle school; we sent surveys to the parents of our feeder elementary schools; and I visited local PTA meetings, attended



U.S. Sen. Michael Bennet observes Grant Beacon Middle Schools' blended learning program.



Expand our use of technology and differentiate instruction through school-wide, blended learning, and lengthen the school day to provide more academic enrichment opportunities. But in another test of our resolve, and after a great deal of work, our proposal was denied.

The denial was devastating, especially because it was a part of the same fund that helped us write the original innovation grant. Nonetheless, we regrouped and took matters into our own hands. I encouraged the staff, letting them know that we were going to find other funding sources and move forward no matter what.

We decided to apply for a district grant that funded projects to expand the school day. We were funded, and since then have been the district's model.

To become a blended learning school, we dismantled our computer labs and set up systems to support our blended learning model. We did this in stages, starting with just reading and math classrooms at first. It was important not only to rely on outside resources, but also to look at the resources that existed within our building.

We also committed to extending our school day to provide our students enriching activities, interventions, and advanced classes aligned with our academic goals. To make this happen, our staff collaborated to create a schedule that worked for everyone while adding five hours of instructional time to our week. Teachers received a small stipend for the added time. Community members also were invited to share their expertise by leading enrichment courses. For example, one parent convinced her employer to let her teach an aerospace engineering class. Now, we have rockets launching in our playground and kids learning how to fly.

Another upside for teachers was that by partnering with parents and community providers to lead enrichment activities, we could carve out more time for teachers to plan, collaborate, and develop lessons.

community events, held informational meetings, and spoke at local educational forums.

As you might imagine, the anonymous surveys gave respondents the opportunity to offer both positive and negative feedback. Although some responses were demoralizing, we kept reading because we also received some great ideas that began to frame a plan for transforming our school. There were thoughtful requests for more enrichment classes in arts; music; gifted and talented opportunities; leadership; and science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

We also discovered unanimous interest in analyzing the use of time. Teachers expressed concern about how to manage time better to meet, plan, and get professional development tailored to each teacher's needs. Students explained that they wanted more hands-on classes and help with doing homework.

After our year of hard work, the innovation team made a convincing argument that becoming an innovation school is something we needed to do to meet the diverse needs of our community. Throughout the process

I checked in with everyone, reviewed the plan, and advocated for the changes. My transition as a leader felt complete, and with a final vote of 96 percent staff approval, I knew that we had a solid plan and true dedication to a shared mission and vision.

### **New Culture and Curriculum**

Now as a new innovation school, one of the first steps was to develop a mission statement. After weeks of deliberation, tears, and some laughter, the staff finally came to a full agreement:

*Achieve, Lead, and Grow Together. Grant Beacon Middle School is committed to the high achievement and growth of every student, providing a college-preparatory program of study that sets high expectations and requires critical thinking and problem-solving skills. Through the integration of technology and collaborative work of students, staff, families, and community partners, GBMS will bring together its neighborhoods' diverse communities and prepare students with the academic knowledge and 21st century leadership skills necessary for college and career success.*

As a new innovation school, we were urged to write grants to fund our vision for two major reform themes:

“Extended learning opportunities get to the heart of what I believe is the essence of education: unleashing passion,” Saab says. “Teachers can teach what they are passionate about and experience their students in a different context. The community has the opportunity to connect with students and staff and offer new voices, perspectives, and talents.”

We also dedicated time for grade levels and departments to meet during the school day, and we no longer have after-school professional development. Instead, we use Friday late-starts for our data teams to meet and to provide differentiated professional development.

Today, Grant Beacon is thriving. Our more than 50 enrichment programs often are led by outside partners, including business experts, Shakespeare drama troupes, and local scientists. We now have a waiting list to get in. We have shed our low-performer status and erased “failure” from our vocabulary.

### Lessons Learned

Here are six strategies that we have determined are essential to thriving when implementing a change initiative.

## Principal ONLINE

Access the following Web resources by visiting *Principal* magazine online: [www.naesp.org/SeptOct14](http://www.naesp.org/SeptOct14)

➤ Tune in to **Grant Beacon Middle School’s YouTube video**, which describes the school’s blended learning program.

➤ Read more **reflections and insights on school leadership** from the author’s blog, *Courageous Principals*.

➤ Access Grant Beacon Middle School’s **learning management system**, which supports the school’s blended learning model.

➤ “**Setting a Vision for Change Leadership**,” from the *Principal* archives, provides perspectives from four principals on the challenges and triumphs of leading their schools through shifts.

### 1 Create a sense of urgency.

Only 10 percent of our students would stay after school to take advantage of extra help we offered. I often had to pull them off buses for not completing homework. As a principal, you have to analyze your data and have an idea of where you want to take the school.

This cannot be done alone; it has to be done with a team.

**2 Build your team.** People want to help when the cause is right and the problem is defined. My dean of students found community providers that normally teach after-school programs to teach during our extended day time and help make our new schedule work.

**3 Don’t be afraid to ask for help.** We knew that it would take a team effort to make the needed changes. I spoke to everyone from teachers, parents, community members, and board members to the superintendent to get the help needed for our school. Sometimes they would decline joining a team or committee, but instead give valuable advice, and other times they would just point me in the right direction to get what we needed.

**4 Develop a shared vision.** Don’t underestimate the importance of defining what you are trying to solve or become. We often skip this step, which allows an effort to go in different directions. Today, our mission statement is the mantra that guides decisions and keeps us on track.

**5 Never let up.** Setbacks are part of change. There were plenty of times where I questioned the direction and my own leadership skills, but we



Principal Alex Magaña teaches an afterschool class of Aikido, a Japanese martial arts form.

still continue to move forward. When times get tough, I remind my staff and parent leaders that our mission is to uphold Grant Beacon’s shared vision for how to best serve our students.

**6 Celebrate success.** We are approaching our third year of focusing on blended learning and our extended school day. In one year, we went from not meeting to meeting expectations. We have also increased the demand for our school. For the first time in our school’s history, we have a waiting list of students asking to attend. Our attendance has improved by 2 percent, and we have even reduced our out-of-school suspension rate by more than 50 percent.

While that’s a lot to celebrate, we are not finished yet. We are further ahead than we planned to be, and we are continuously refining our models and making the programs even better than the year before. As Lauren Danielson, one of our teachers says, “We are constantly learning, right alongside the students and I have been pushed out of my comfort zone.”

It is exciting to know that we took a school from a low-performing status to a thriving community of learners, with high demand, teacher and student leadership, and positive school culture. 📌

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