

Don't Fear Labels

In today's world of accountability, where headlines such as "Entire Staff Fired" and "School Closed Due to Failure" scream for attention, it is no wonder that there is also talk of principal shortages and ever-increasing scrutiny on principal preparedness. As a former principal of a diverse, Title I elementary school for four years, I'll be the first to admit that I often led scared, afraid of an impending "did not make adequate yearly progress (AYP)" label being affixed to my school.

On the outside, I was a fearless instructional leader and an advocate for my school. I did whatever I could to affirm our staff in a collegial way when our walkthrough and achievement data showed our progress, striving to secure resources and staffing support for our students, and keeping the focus on effective instruction and student engagement. However, as we near the lofty, imagined, and yet-to-be-met 100 percent pass rates in 2014, principals are meanwhile confronted with the current, tangible realities of today. Issues such as attendance, discipline, transience, instructional alignment to ever-changing benchmarks, budgetary challenges, and professional growth for our staff are pressing matters among many others that require our thought and time.

Rather than fear the label, today's building leader should embrace the realities and seek to lead in a climate that is desperately craving instructional leaders and role models for the school community to follow. It is no fun to continually analyze the numbers to ensure that all AYP subgroups' data are above water. Yet, despite having the full and ongoing support of my division, I felt continual pressure due to rising accountability measures that could result in an unfavorable label or status for our school. However, by focusing on priorities that are essential to a school's success, principals can embrace this important role and realize success regardless of any potential label.

Establish clear goals that everyone understands. As much as the principal might disagree about the current federal or state benchmark, he or she must convey the current state to the entire staff and set applicable goals to

move the ball forward in terms of student achievement. Be frank about the needs of the school. For example, when requesting resources from the district or writing grants, state specifics: "All teachers have completed SMART board certification, yet we still only have three SMART boards installed and need 12 more to meet our team goals." Don't just grumble; be proactive and work to find ways to meet your needs. Clearly stating the goals and matching it with a true need will increase attention to the subject and improve the chances of realizing the resources you need.

Focus on engaged learning and fun. Work hard to ensure that staff, students, and parents see school as a place where they can succeed and engage in high-quality learning. By encouraging teachers to share ideas and demonstrate instructional methods during a faculty meeting, principals can play an active role in celebrating the accomplishments from within and encouraging the school community to embrace learning for all students. Principals should not operate from a spirit of fear ("Oh no, we have to complete those practice assessments"), but instead should lead by example in ensuring that higher order thinking is occurring across the classrooms for each student. As principals, even if we feel we often operate in a top-down accountability model, we should continually promote, as Carol Ann Tomlinson and Jay McTighe write in *Integrating Differentiated Instruction and Understanding by Design*, that "learning happens *within* students, not *to* them."

Be advocates for our role as leaders. Rather than sounding defeatist, the successful principal works to stay involved in the profession, seeking to have a voice in a dialogue that must

include practitioners who are aware of current realities in today's schools. We should lend a voice and share our principal perspective when issues such as local funding for schools or reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (i.e., No Child Left Behind) arise. And we know that our role extends beyond merely serving as instructional leader. As a Title I principal, I knew that if a student came to school hungry, he or she was going to have difficulty learning. I knew that simply acquiring technology was not enough; we had to find innovative ways to share, model, and improve our work on a daily basis. I knew I had to strive to attract and retain the best staff because our school and students depended on them to succeed. These skills are not learned overnight and we must lean upon each other as leaders and seek to collaborate, share, and grow in our role. We cannot neglect our own growth as leaders or we will fail.

I realize that it is never easy to face potential failure. Principals who work in challenging schools often take a risk. We might be the first to be labeled as failing and perhaps face unrealistic goals throughout our tenure. However, our schools need the best and should have leaders who want to be there. We can be effective change agents and sustain an environment of strength and support even when we are serving in a world of accountability where labels are just one round of testing away from becoming a reality. 

William L. Sterrett, a former principal, is an assistant professor of educational leadership at the University of North Carolina-Wilmington.

HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO SPEAK OUT

The author believes that a school's inability to attain AYP does not accurately portray the successes realized in classrooms. How much weight does your district or community put on labels despite your school's improvements? Submit your thoughts at www.naesp.org/blog and click on "Speaking Out."