The job of an instructional leader, according to former Baltimore principal Deborah Wortham, is to be a gardener. School cultures left unattended, she says, sprout weeds that will eventually overwhelm the research-based programs, practices, and best efforts of teachers and administrators. The most aggressive and harmful educational weeds Wortham has had to pull in her career are the “weeds of isolation” and that pernicious weed with the long name: the I-did-everything-I-could-so-it-must-be-the-kid’s-fault weed. Working the good soil of collaboration, shared beliefs, conscious commitments, and effective protocols have made Wortham a success in opening failing schools to the sunshine of effective instruction.

It is the fundamental job of today’s instructional leaders, Wortham asserts, to “make a conscious effort to shape a school culture.” To do this, they must get staff to “willingly talk about assumptions, habits, expectations,” and their own isolation. “The cultural norms that govern our schools are basically invisible,” she says, and so they are often unexamined. “But if we search for weeds, we surely will find them because all gardens have weeds.”

Of course, doing all the weeding by yourself is backbreaking. That’s why Wortham so strongly believes in sharing the leadership with teachers, secretaries, custodians, assistant principals, and parents. Creating and maintaining teams that are motivated and empowered to identify problems and find solutions for them is key. Working with those teams, and keeping their commitment strong and focused on learning, Wortham’s goal is to create a school environment that is so healthy and so collaborative that teachers know they have nothing to fear if they admit they don’t know how to do something. Fear is a weed.

Three Key Questions

There are three key questions that drive Wortham and her leadership teams:

- What do we do when they haven’t learned it?
- “It’s the third question that I base my entire work on,” she says. “I get to school at 7:00 in the morning. The kids arrive at 8:00. By 8:10 I’m in the classrooms, where I spend 50 percent of my time during the day. At the end of the day, I summarize my notes and reflect on what I need to do with my department heads or teams to fill in the gaps and to actualize the commitment we’ve all made.”

In an earlier life, Wortham was the first facilitator for Success For All. So she thoroughly understands how well-structured educational protocols can keep instruction constantly on track. “When we created our professional learning community,” she says, “we looked at curriculum and we determined what was to be taught each week.” To keep instruction on the fast track, Wortham met with each team every week.

“School cultures left unattended... sprout weeds that eventually overwhelm... the best efforts of teachers and administrators.”

Making the Garden Grow

As a result, curricular consistency became a reality. It got to the point, she recounts, “where if I started in one third-grade room, and I left the room while the teacher was in the middle of a sentence, when I reached the third-grade room next door, the second teacher would be finishing the first one’s sentence.”

This level of coordination and cooperation, coupled with a regular examination of student data, effectively targets instruction at learning problems as they arise. Students are regrouped, instruction is honed, and achievement is then measured once again. Find the weeds, pull them up, and replant with more effective instruction.

Can her school gardening strategy be taught? Wortham is unabashedly positive and has this advice for new principals:

- You have to figure out what you need to do for your teachers. That’s the key. They must have your support and you must share leadership with them. You must share your vision and your mission. There must be collective learning. You must create caring conditions for both students and teachers. Your organization must respect learning and teaching. Do away with naysaying by pulling up the weeds. Courageous leaders are gardeners, and gardeners’ work is to pull up weeds.

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