Making a Good School Great

Like many of us, I probably do my best thinking in the quiet solitude of my car as I drive to and from school. When I was offered this position as principal of an elementary school about 12 minutes from Boston, my 45-minute drive each way was the only item I listed on the “cons” side of my “pros/cons” list. Fourteen years later, as I look back, I consider the commute my epiphany time.

One winter morning as I was driving to school, with the sun barely creeping above the horizon, I thought about a question I was asked at a school committee meeting the night before: “You have a good school; how did you get there?” I immediately answered, “I have great teachers!” The committee member wanted to know more, but it was late. He asked that I share my description of the attributes and actions of the great teachers at the next meeting. It wouldn’t be hard to pull this description together.

Defining ‘Great’

Great teachers are lifelong learners who are involved in ongoing, effective professional development that enables them to address the needs of their students through assessment, analysis, and strong teaching practice. They are a collegial group who value collective wisdom, and welcome and validate good ideas from those new to the profession, as well as those from veteran teachers. They differentiate their instruction to meet the needs of each of their students. They create a safe learning environment where their students feel comfortable taking risks in sharing thoughts and ideas.

Great teachers demonstrate their commitment to the child. They have positive relationships with and high expectations for each student. In all that they do, in every hour of the school day (as well as before and after school), in every learning opportunity, they are ensuring a child-centered environment and learning experience. Great teachers welcome parent support, and share with them their pride in the learning community. You just can’t have a great school without great teachers!

As I pulled into the school parking lot, I had a pleasant feeling in the back of my consciousness—I was scheduled to spend the morning in a classroom with a great teacher. As I looked around the classroom, I saw a child-friendly environment. The teacher’s plans and organization of appropriate materials showed that she knew the needs of her students well. Throughout the morning, I saw sound teaching in practice. I also saw a flow of children leaving the classroom with reading specialists and special educators. Some children returned after having missed the first half-hour of the math class. They seemed lost in a familiar place. As the morning ended, some readers had not had direct instruction from the teacher after they returned, but they knew the teacher would “catch up” in the afternoon.

When I met with the teacher a day later, she was pleased that I could see all of the energy and expertise she had invested in her children. “I don’t mind working hard,” she said. “I’ll work as hard as it takes to reach every child, but there just isn’t enough time. There are too many interruptions. I don’t have my children when I need them. In fact, I can’t help feeling that I am leaving some children behind.”

Removing Roadblocks

Weeks after this conversation, I had an epiphany—I was the architect of disruption! I created the schedule each year, so I owned the roadblocks that directed teachers and students to start, stop, and abruptly head in different directions. To corrupt the words of Shakespeare, the schedule is the thing! The schedule had to have a different look to it. Instead of approaching it with the goal of fitting everything in, I had to create uninterrupted classroom time for teaching and learning. As principal, I had to get these roadblocks out of the way so that great teachers could do their great teaching.

Now, there is a different look to the school day. Teachers and students have an uninterrupted 90-minute block of literacy, and a similar 60-minute block of math. Reading specialists and special education teachers join teachers in the classroom during the blocks. Science, social studies, art, music, physical education, and library fill out the rest of the school day. What does the classroom look like now? It is an environment that is more relaxed for both students and teachers. Quantitatively, test scores have improved significantly.

I, the former architect of disruption, have removed at least one roadblock, one barrier that stood in the way of great teachers. As principals, we must do all that we can to ensure that our great teachers are given every opportunity to do great teaching. For my school, working hard with great teachers resulted in a good school, a very good school. But working hard and smart with great teachers can take a school from good to great!

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