

The Rubik's Cube of School Leadership

While strolling through the streets of a popular Cape Cod town this summer, I passed by a toy shop window and a familiar, rainbow-colored, 3 x 3-inch cube caught my eye. It was a Rubik's Cube, a three-dimensional puzzle that I have not played with since the early 1980s. I purchased the cube to satisfy a summertime regression to my simpler adolescent life, as well as to pass time during the waning dog days of August. But as I attempted once again to master the challenging feat of matching the colors on each of the cube's six sides, I thought about how this game reveals lessons that we all face as educators and leaders. Every year, we encounter and solve challenges that must be addressed on several levels, just as the Rubik's Cube puzzle must be solved side by side and layer by layer.

The Teaching Layer

Each day teachers make decisions before, during, and after classroom lessons to successfully engage students in the learning process, maneuvering through numerous machinations to address diverse learning styles and skills. Their struggle to differentiate lessons and activities that correspond to the various needs of their students requires a similar investment of time, thought, planning, and reflection needed to solve the Rubik's Cube puzzle.

Effective teachers must break down lessons into small components, reinventing them again and again. And just when they think they've created a lesson that engages all learners successfully, they notice other possibilities and combinations that might work better.

"School administrators are regularly challenged to implement various courses of action in order to arrive at the right solution."

In a similar process, we can match the colors on three sides of the Rubik's Cube before we are forced to start over in order to succeed on all sides.

The Administrative Layer

School administrators are regularly challenged to implement various courses of action in order to arrive at the right solution. The search for continuous school improvement, for example, requires school leaders to study, plan, implement, analyze, reflect, and adjust throughout the decision-making process—the same skills and actions necessary to conquer the Rubik's Cube.

Just as we must match the different colors of the cube, school leaders must satisfy various school constituencies. Some groups may be less satisfied than others with our decisions, yet we struggle to incorporate disparate needs in our plans. Likewise, we evaluate and match

teachers with programs and assignments, hoping to ensure successful alignments even as we seek assistance from others who have faced similar challenges. Ultimately, we take risks and see successes with some of the decisions we make. However, we also experience disappointment and disillusionment when our best efforts fail to deliver—when we don't get the puzzle pieces to line up correctly.

I remember the first time I actually matched all sides of a Rubik's Cube. I was 12, it was late at night in the basement of my childhood home, and I was fighting to keep my eyes open. My goal was to match just one side of the cube. Twisting and turning the columns and rows, I completed the red side, and then I completed the green side. With another effort, I matched the yellow side. I turned the cube around, and to my amazement, I realized that I had inadvertently completed the puzzle with all six colors aligned!

As an adult, manipulating the childhood puzzle again on a warm summer day enabled me to reflect on the responsibilities we hold as educators and the challenges we must conquer. As we strive to make the decisions that will benefit the students in our classrooms, schools, and districts, we must understand it requires the same sort of persistence, examination, collaboration, action, and reflection needed to solve the Rubik's Cube puzzle.

The puzzle's final lesson as we struggle with difficult decisions and changes throughout the school year is to remain faithful to the ultimate prize—enhancing student learning. Then, when we least expect it, all of the colors will match. ■

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