



Improving a Struggling Teacher

Principals work with many teachers throughout their professional journey, some of whom are more prepared for the classroom than others. What we do to help struggling teachers is what matters most to the school and, ultimately, the students under our care.

As I look back on my principalship, I remember one kindergarten teacher with several years of classroom experience who began a new school year deficient in two important areas: effective teaching and classroom management. Upon visiting her classroom, I found “controlled chaos.” I visited several more times and each time I held a post-observation conference with her. After about three visits, she finally admitted that she needed help.

Sadly, after giving her much assistance, holding many teacher/principal conferences, and sorting through her various excuses, the teacher continued to struggle. Even after implementing additional interventions—co-teaching with her, modeling skills for her, sending her to observe peers, writing a reading script for her, and many other efforts—with little success, it was clear she needed to be placed on a formal improvement plan.

Executing the Plan

Our first endeavor was to get her class under control, which required starting over in the middle of the first semester. We began with new class rules, making sure that the teacher and her assistant were clear on what the class must look like, and that the students knew that all behaviors had consequences. Simultaneously, the assistant principal, the teacher, and I rearranged her classroom and wrote a schedule for group rotation. We set expectations for the students, teachers, and assistants and we discussed morning message time, including what would be taught during this period, and explained how groups should rotate from center to center. We went over the

script for reading, a step-by-step process of strategies that included “eyes on me” instruction, directives to maintain constant student engagement, and oral reading procedures.

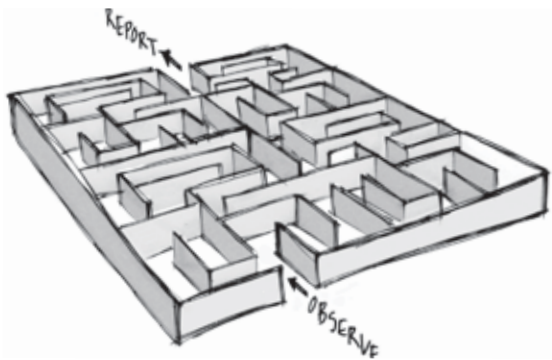
After modeling the process and the strategies for the teacher, the assistant principal and I spent several weeks in her classroom. Each afternoon, we conferenced with her and during those weeks the teacher was slowly given complete control. We could see the light on her face growing brighter and the tears decreasing with each passing day. She was feeling like a “real teacher.” Our visits went from a full day to half a day to, eventually, once a week. At the end of the improvement plan schedule, we decided to continue it through the remainder of the school year.

It was amazing to see what this teacher was able to accomplish in that time. When a state screener visited her class, the students performed as well or better than some of the other classes. All of her students were readers and ready to enter first grade. When the teacher was told of her renewal for the next year, she teared up, saying she realized how, with effective instruction, she could take kindergarten students further than she ever knew was possible.

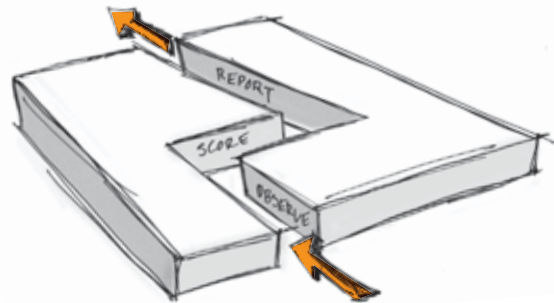
If we are to demand effective teachers, we, as principals, must also be effective leaders. We must be strong enough to do what has to be done, but kind enough to recognize when to lead with our hearts. We can change the world, one teacher at a time and one student at a time, and it all begins with the principal.

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